

there will not be such endings

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by [angelsdemonsducks](#)

Summary

Tubbo wakes from a dream of fire and smoke to find Tommy shaking him.

Tommy is bright, is loud, is irritating and joyful and a force of unbridled chaos. So when, seemingly overnight, his laughs turn brittle and his eyes turn shadowed, and flinches start to punctuate every movement he makes, no one knows why, or what to do about it.

Tubbo and Wilbur are concerned, to say the least. And they're not the only ones.

(Meanwhile, Tommy is desperately trying to prevent a nightmare from happening to everyone he knows. And if he has to sacrifice himself to make this the best possible timeline, so be it.)

Tubbo

Chapter Notes

I have no self-restraint, apparently. So here's a new multi-chapter fic. Time travel fics are one of my favorite tropes for literally any fandom, so I guess I should be surprised it took me this long to write one of my own.

Standard disclaimer here that this is about the rp characters, not the content creators themselves. All relationships in this fic are strictly platonic.

Title is from IT by Stephen King. I referenced this quote in my other ongoing fic, and then my brain went hey, you could make a whole new fic out of that. So here we are.

Chapter content warnings for mentions of death (hypothetical).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tubbo wakes from a dream of fire and smoke to find Tommy shaking him.

It takes a few seconds for his brain to puzzle through that fact, sleep-addled as he feels, and he blinks blearily. In that time, Tommy doesn't stop shaking his shoulder, rather roughly in his opinion, and that's about when he realizes that Tommy is speaking, too.

“Tubbo, Tubbo, wake up, Tubbo, you’ve got to wake up, you need to wake up, Tubbo—”

The words fall from his lips like a litany, like a prayer, and Tubbo is definitely still half-asleep, but it doesn't take a genius to figure out something is wrong. Because Tommy doesn't do this, doesn't sound like this, not even when he has a nightmare and slips into his or Wilbur's bed for the night. Then, he never admits that he's seeking comfort, just says some bullshit about shitty air conditioning or people nearby being too loud, and Tubbo never calls him on it. He doesn't know if Wilbur does, but he doubts it. If they called him on it, he would stop coming; Tommy's particular about that, about anything that could threaten his self-set image as a big manly man.

Which makes this odd. And more than a little concerning. Tommy sounds all wet and choked, like he's crying, and Tubbo's first thought is that maybe someone has died.

So he sits up, swiping at his eyes to try to bring some focus into them. Tommy jerks back from him, as if surprised by the motion.

“M awake, Tommy,” he says. “What's the matter? Are you alright?”

Stupid question, really, because clearly Tommy is not alright. His room is dim, making Tommy barely more than a vague silhouette in front of him, but even in the darkness he can

see the way he's holding himself all tensely, and the expression on his face is not a happy one, even if Tubbo can't make out particulars.

For a long second, Tommy is completely quiet. It sort of makes Tubbo wonder if he's still asleep, and just gone from one nightmare to another. Because Tommy's never so quiet. Never ever.

"Tubbo?" he finally says, voice trembling, wavering. "Are you okay?"

... What?

"Tommy," he says. "Tommy, that's what I just asked you. Course I'm alright. I was sleeping. You woke me up."

"Right, yeah, sorry," Tommy says, and he sounds way more distraught than the situation warrants. And then, to Tubbo's horror, he sniffles. Actually sniffles. Like he's crying. Actually crying.

Oh, gods, someone really has died.

"It's just," Tommy continues, before he can think of a way to ask whether they've got a funeral to attend, "it's just, Tubbo. You're good? You're really alright? You're here?"

There is definitely something very strange going on here. But he's so very tired, and thinking feels like wading through molasses, and he can't get his brain to cooperate with him enough to formulate a proper theory. Also, he hasn't ruled out the idea that he's still asleep, in which case he'll wake up tomorrow unnerved but otherwise alright, and he'll be able to put the whole thing out of sight, out of mind. Because Tommy will be normal. Everything will be normal. As normal as it can be during a revolution.

"Not sure where else I'd be," he says. "It's nighttime. So I should be in here, shouldn't I? Sleeping? Not like there's anything else to be doing. You know Wilbur doesn't like us taking the night patrols." He squints, wishing he could see his face better. As things are, he can't tell what Tommy's eyes are doing, which is unfortunate, because Tommy's eyes are very expressive. "Did you—you keep asking if I'm okay. Did you have a nightmare?"

It's breaking an unspoken rule, asking outright like that, but he's not sure what else to do. He fully expects Tommy to deny him flat. But instead, Tommy draws in a shuddering breath, and laughs a little, a quiet, broken thing, and Tubbo is one hundred percent alarmed now. Or at least, as alarmed as his stupid tired brain will let him be.

"Sure," Tommy says. "Yeah, we'll call it that. A big, stupid nightmare. Oh, Prime, Tubbo, it just went on and on and didn't end and I couldn't wake up."

Tubbo's got absolutely no clue what to do with this.

"Well, you're awake now, aren't you?" he asks lamely. Tommy laughs again, that same broken laugh.

“Fuck if I know,” he says. “Maybe I just traded one nightmare for another. Except—no, no, you’re here, you’re here, so it has to be better, right? This is better. Fuck, this is just—I wish I knew what they—” About halfway through this, he starts muttering to himself, as if he’s forgotten Tubbo is there at all. So Tubbo just sits there awkwardly, trying to figure out what the fuck Tommy’s talking about, when Tommy abruptly stops.

“How’s Wilbur, these days?” he demands.

“Um?” he replies. “Fine, I guess? I suppose he’s very stressed, but he’s doing his best. We are at war, you know. Tommy, you just saw him a few hours ago, why are you asking me that?” An idea occurs to him. “Do you want to go get him? He stays up real late, he might still be up. Maybe he can—”

“No!” Tommy exclaims, and his vehemence takes him aback. And when he continues, his voice is softer, but there’s a note of some emotion that his sleepy brain can’t parse out. “No, Tubbo, I can’t go to Wilbur with this. Not even—no. Not even now. Can’t risk it.”

“Tommy, you are genuinely starting to freak me out a little.”

Tommy straight-up flinches a bit, which was not his intention at all, but since when is Tommy so easily injured by words? Where is the bravado? The insults? The over-the-top loudness? Sure, it’s fuck off o’clock in the morning, and he’s rolling with the nightmare idea because it’s the only possibility that makes even a lick of sense, but still.

“I’m sorry,” Tommy says, and there is the weirdness again, because Tommy almost never apologizes for anything, not by using the word itself, and now he’s done it twice in the span of ten minutes. “I didn’t mean to—I guess it just really unsettled me, yeah? I didn’t mean to disturb you, Tubbo.”

The words themselves are fine, but the way he says them is—wrong. Wrong in a way he can’t put a finger on, but definitely wrong, and he feels the need to backtrack a bit.

“No, I mean, it’s fine, Tommy,” he says. “I’m just a bit worried about you, is all.”

Instead of going off on him about how he doesn’t need anyone’s worry, thank you very much, Tommy heaves a gusty sigh.

“You’re a good friend, Tubbo,” he says. “The very best one I have. You do know that, don’t you?”

And Tubbo blinks, because—yes, he knows. He knows that Tommy cares about him a whole lot, and that he cares about Tommy a whole lot in turn. But it’s mostly another one of those unspoken things. Tommy shows his love by calling him names and roping him into chaos. Not by stating it plain.

“I know. You’re my best friend too,” he says. “Tommy, are you sure you’re okay?”

In response, Tommy wraps him up in a hug. It’s so unexpected that he freezes up for a good three seconds before managing to return it.

“I could live without you, Tubs,” Tommy mumbles into his shoulder, the words barely distinguishable. “It’s so fucking hard, but I can do it. But I don’t want to. I don’t ever want you to not be with me, okay? So you have to remember that. You have to, you have to stay alive. Because I know I’m myself without you, but myself is hard to be when you’re not there.”

“I’m not,” he starts, and his throat has gone dry, so he has to swallow and start again. “I’m not going anywhere, big man, I promise.”

His heart is racing, galloping a hundred meters per second. He doesn’t understand where this has all come from; would a nightmare make him react like this? A nightmare is still the only reasonable explanation, but his surety in the explanation has begun to slip through his fingers. Nightmares are terrible, but nightmares are not reality, and the way Tommy is talking, it’s like he’s lived it. Like he’s lived in a world where Tubbo himself... wasn’t there any longer, and it doesn’t make any sense at all.

Another thought occurs to him, this one far more horrible, and maybe nobody’s died yet, but what if someone’s *going* to? What if Tommy—?

“*You’re* not, are you? Going anywhere?”

“Not planning on it,” Tommy says, though there is a peculiar emptiness in his tone that doesn’t help Tubbo to believe him at all. And after a moment, Tommy pulls away.

“I know you’ll do your best,” he says, voice firmer now. “That’s alright. I’ll do my best too. It’s gonna be so fucking best, it’ll set a new record, that’s how much best I’ll be doing. I think I know what I need to do now.”

He feels wrongfooted, like the conversation’s been snatched out from under him, turned on its head once again. Why couldn’t Tommy have picked a more reasonable time to have—whatever this is? Like late afternoon? Late afternoon’s a good time for talking.

“What’s that?” he asks.

Tommy snorts. “A whole fucking lot, that’s what,” he says. “I’ll tell you later, how’s that? You can go back to sleep now.”

And that—that stings, just a little. Because Tommy makes plans, and then Tommy tells him about the plans so they can enact them together. That’s how this works. That’s how this always works. Except now, Tommy’s got some kind of plan that he’s not telling him about, and Tubbo’s not so sleepy that it doesn’t hurt, just a bit, to be left out of the loop. Especially when Tommy’s acting so strangely. Especially when Tubbo’s not sure he should be making any plans at all.

And now Tommy’s getting up. Off the bed. He’s moving to the door, his figure dark and covered in shadows, and Tubbo feels an inexplicable sense of panic.

“Why can’t you tell me?” he blurts out.

Tommy pauses. Turns his head back to look at him. Tubbo still can't make out his eyes.

"Go back to sleep, Tubbo," he repeats, and then he slips out into the corridor and vanishes. His footsteps retreat, and then there is nothing. Tubbo is left alone, sitting up in bed with all the lights off, the moon barely a suggestion outside his window. If he looked outside, he would find the peace of the night undisturbed, and that feels wrong, somehow, that the wider world will not reflect the talk he's just had.

The world does not revolve around TommyInnit, he knows. But sometimes he feels like it should. And something, somehow, is fundamentally different.

He considers going to get Wilbur. But Tommy's voice fills his ears again, and he almost flinches at the phantom of his panic. Perhaps it means he should go get Wilbur after all; anything that Tommy so desperately doesn't want Wilbur to know is sure to have some sort of repercussions. But then, perhaps it truly is nothing, a nightmare that shook him more than usual, and Tommy will be so angry if he goes to Wilbur with something like that. Tommy looks up to the man like a brother, they both do, but for Tommy, that means a determination to always seem capable in front of him, to never show a sign of weakness, even though Tubbo knows very well that Wilbur would do just about anything for Tommy's sake.

No getting Wilbur, then. And if he's not going to get Wilbur, there's really nothing left to do. So he slides back under his covers, lies down, and tries to go back to sleep, to put the whole thing out of his head until the morning.

It doesn't quite work. And when he does finally slip back into dreams, his nightmares return. There is no fire, no smoke, but there is Tommy, disembodied and faceless, his voice as desperate as any soldier trying to seek home.

He tosses and turns until the sky turns pink and the birds begin to sing.

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter to start with, but my chapters tend to get longer the further into a fic I get. Hopefully I'll land somewhere in the range of 3-4k words and not 6-7k words like my revivebur fic. I anticipate a little less actual plot in this one, so maybe I'll be able to stick to it.

Also on that note, updates will be irregular until said revivebur fic is finished, as this is currently somewhat of a side project. But I'm really looking forward to seeing where this one takes me, so I hope y'all stick around!

My tumblr is [here](#)! And if you'd like to leave some kudos or drop a comment, I'll love you forever. Feedback feeds the writing machine!

Next up, Chapter Two: In which Sapnap wasn't expecting TommyInnit of all people to stumble into their ~~sleepover~~ war meeting, but he has, and it gets weirder from there.

Sapnap

Chapter Notes

Oh my god, the response to the first chapter?? Blew me away??? Y'all are amazing, seriously! So here's another one, slightly earlier than I thought it'd be.

A note on the timeline: the canon timeline makes about zero sense to me, so for the sake of this fic, I'm just going to say that canon events happened over a vague, handwavey number of months, i.e. the revolution was a few months, Tommy's exile was a few months, etc. Tommy was 17 by the time he traveled back, and he is currently physically 15, almost 16.

Also! I did want to say that the point in the timeline that Tommy comes back from is not canon-compliant. Since I'm writing as I go, there will be some parts of my vague plan for this fic that I'll change or update as we get more lore. Other parts, though, I have slightly more planned out and don't intend to change, and this is particularly relevant to Egg lore and events surrounding it (especially since the Red Banquet is tomorrow, as of my posting this, and god knows how that's going to go). So, some of the lore for this fic is likely to be very different from canon, and I want to make sure y'all know that from the get-go!

Tommy's timeline is canon-compliant up until after he gets out of prison. The divergence happens after that, and that's all I'll say for now. :)

Content warnings this chapter for swearing and mentioned violence.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sapnap has never thought of himself as an outwardly sentimental person, but nights like tonight make him consider changing his mind on that front.

Things have been weird, lately. Weird in a different kind of way from the usual weirdness. Personally, he blames Wilbur Soot and his dumb drug van that has somehow evolved into a dumb country and a dumb revolution, because apparently he thinks it's fine to be invited onto someone else's server and promptly declare independence. But whatever, it's fine, and so what if it's getting a little more intense than the games they usually play? So what if Dream's starting to get strangely obsessive about the whole thing? Sapnap thinks he might too, in his position, and there's no need to get too worried about it anyway. There's no way this war—if it can be called a war at all—will last much longer.

But it's been weird.

Nights like this, though, remind him that it'll all be okay in the end. Because tonight started out as a war meeting, all of them hunched around a table in Dream's base, talking over plans

and hypothetical ways to kick the L'Manbergians straight into next week the next time they fight. But over time, conversation shifted to other things, lighter things, and Dream flicked water at George's face for some reason, and George retaliated by throwing small objects at Dream's mask, and somehow that's resulted in them all piling onto each other in front of the TV, watching really terrible horror movies. Dream tosses popcorn at the screen whenever someone makes a horrendous decision, and they're all cracking stupid jokes and making silly commentary, and Sapnap feels warm and tired and safe. It feels like old times, when it was just the three of them on this server, or maybe even like just a few months ago, before Wilbur got it into his head to create a drug empire and they were all still friends, and the stealing and the grieving was all in good fun and the disc thing was a joke and not something that Dream is still weirdly preoccupied with.

It's a nice reminder. Things were good before, and they'll be good again. Everything will go back to normal soon, and right now, with Dream draped across his lap and George half sprawled over both of them, he can't think of anywhere he'd rather be.

And then, Tommy stumbles into the room.

He blinks a few times, because what? But no, Tommy's still there, even though this is about the last thing he expected to happen. Scratch that, it's like, the negative third thing he expected to happen tonight, because what is *Tommy* doing here?

There is a split second in which his instinct is to go for a weapon. But even disregarding how fucked up that is, because this is still Tommy, still the kid he joked around with and hung out with in the early days, and he doesn't want him hurt or dead no matter how annoying he's been lately—even disregarding all of that, the urge fades quickly.

Because Tommy looks like shit.

He's unarmed and unarmored, nothing on his back but his usual t-shirt, and that appears rumpled, like he slept in it and didn't bother to change before coming here. His hair is mussed, even more than normal, and his eyes are red-rimmed. Sapnap would chalk it up to sleep deprivation if there weren't obvious tear tracks drying on his cheeks.

Which, holy shit. He doesn't think he's ever seen Tommy cry before. So what the hell could have happened that he would show up in *Dream's* base of all places, alone and looking like this?

"Uh," he says, very eloquently. "We're having a war meeting? What are you doing?"

Tommy's gaze drifts from them to the TV and back to them again.

"Oh, good," Tommy says, and he sounds... off. Like he's trying too hard to sound casual. Sapnap's not quite sure how he knows that, except that there's an odd strain in his voice, and the words don't seem to come easily, like he has to search for them, and that's wrong. Tommy delivers insults as easily as breathing, even when they're not particularly clever ones. "Here I was worried you were having a sleepover. Like middle school girls."

“We can have a sleepover if we want,” George mutters, sounding slightly offended and also like he’s too tired for this. Which, honestly, Sapnap completely agrees with.

“If this is supposed to be a sneak attack or something, it’s a really bad one,” Dream says, and finally puts in the effort of rolling to his feet in one smooth motion and taking a few steps in Tommy’s direction. “Why are you here, Tommy, and how soon can you leave? Or do we need to make you?”

It’s definitely too late at night to sound threatening. Even Dream can’t manage it very well, too much sleep creeping into his voice.

Except it seems to work. Tommy flinches, and takes a step back. Alarm bells start clamoring in Sapnap’s head, because the one thing Tommy has never been is scared of Dream.

Dream catches it too. His head tilts, and he stops his advance. Sapnap exchanges glances with George, and they both get to their feet as well, the earlier warmth and comfort almost forgotten. The movie continues to play in the background, disregarded.

“I’m not here for a fight,” Tommy says, and Sapnap can’t stop his snort.

“You’re always here for a fight,” he says, and Tommy—

Tommy looks at him. Just looks at him, and it’s only for a second, but he could swear that there is something dark in Tommy’s eyes, something dangerous, something that Sapnap has seen before but never in the face of someone so young, something that speaks of loss and bloodshed and an unshakable determination to do whatever it takes. To accomplish what, he doesn’t know, and he can’t find out, because Tommy blinks, looks away, and the moment is gone.

“Not tonight,” Tommy says, and turns his gaze on Dream. And keeps it there. “I want to propose a deal.”

“You want to propose a deal,” Dream repeats. “You want—you came here at three in the morning to try to make a deal with us? I—okay, why? What do you want, and why do you think we’ll give it to you?” Dream’s voice is increasing in both volume and snappiness, and Sapnap can’t blame him; deals, when coming from Tommy, inevitably end in some sort of scam, in his experience, and if Tommy’s really trekked all the way over to their base to try to pull one over them, he’s got another thing coming to him.

But at the same time, Tommy has actually trekked all the way over to their base, looking like he’s halfway to death via exhaustion. His voice is flat, and he’s watching Dream like he’s some sort of predator, like he’s going to attack at the slightest provocation. Which might just be the case, but the point is that Tommy has never seemed this aware of it. Never been careful, never given Dream the respect and caution that his skills deserve, despite Dream besting him in combat time and time again. So somehow, Sapnap doesn’t think that a simple scam is the end goal here.

“You’re going to give it to me because I know you, Dream,” Tommy says, lifting his chin defiantly, and there, *there* is some of his usual spark, his usual confidence. Odd, though, that

it seems to be just that: confidence, not false bravado, not a child playing in shoes several sizes too big, not Tommy trailing after Wilbur like a puppy trying to learn to be a wolf. Just surety. “I know what you want.”

“Oh?” Dream crosses his arms. “And what do I want?”

“The discs,” Tommy says, and Sapnap feels his jaw hit the floor. “And I’ll give them to you. No scams.”

Dream has gone still. Shocked, Sapnap thinks. “You’ll give me the discs?” he says. “Just like that, you’ll give them to me?” He’s disbelieving—but he’s interested. That much is plain as day. And Sapnap still doesn’t *understand* why Dream cares about those things so much, because sure, Tommy was being really annoying about them, but at the end of the day, discs are all they are. Music discs like any other music discs.

“I mean, no, not—not just like *that*,” Tommy says. “This is a deal, man, I want something from you. But that’s what I’m offering. The discs. Both of them.”

Sapnap scans his face, his posture, searching for any sign of a lie. There is none. Tommy’s lips are drawn in a thin line, his expression more serious than any Sapnap has ever seen from him.

“Okay, what is it?” he asks.

“L’Manberg’s independence,” Tommy says. “Independence for the discs.”

And that’s—that’s laughable. This revolution of theirs has barely been going on for a month, and it’s already painfully obvious that they’re going to lose, and badly, that they don’t have the resources or the manpower to defeat Dream. They’re going to crush them; they’re not about to let them form their own country right in the middle of the Greater SMP just because of a couple of music discs. That would be stupid.

Except Dream’s still interested.

“You’d be willing to give up the discs?” he asks, an odd note in his voice, and—he’s considering it. He’s actually considering it.

“Oh, come on, Dream,” George says, apparently thinking along the exact same lines. “You can’t just—”

“Yeah,” Tommy says, and shifts his weight between his feet. He still hasn’t taken his eyes off Dream. His whole body is tense as a bowstring. “I mean, you know. Sometimes you’ve got to think about what’s important.”

“Did Wilbur ask you to do this?” Dream says.

Tommy stays silent. For a moment, Sapnap takes that as a yes, as agreement, and a burst of anger flares, surprising him. But the core of it is this: sure, Tommy’s irritating, but the discs are important to him. That much has been made extremely clear. So for Wilbur to force the kid to give them up for the sake of his grand country would be messed up.

But Dream laughs, soft and low. “He doesn’t even know you’re here, does he?” he says, and Sapnap starts, looking back to Tommy for his reaction.

Tommy winces.

Did the child really waltz into enemy territory without telling anyone where he was going? That’s stupid, even for him.

“What Wilbur doesn’t know can’t hurt him,” Tommy snaps, and then scowls. “Well, usually. I take that back, actually. But I’m not here because he told me to. I’m here because this—this is the best choice. It’s the best outcome. So how about you just take the fucking things, and then you go away and leave us alone forever, eh? How about that?”

Dream hums. “And how do you know I won’t take the discs and then raze your little country to the ground anyway?” he asks. “What would stop me?”

Tommy levels a flat stare, and for a second, it’s like there’s someone else peering out of his face.

“I’d fucking stop you, you bitch,” he says. “I’m not—I’ve got news for you, buddy. You think you’re some kind of god. Well, you’re not. You’re just some guy, just like the rest of us, and so what if you’re all strong and shit? There’s always someone stronger.” He pauses for a moment. “There are worse monsters out there than you, Dream. More powerful things. And if you start trying to play your games with me, I’ll take you the fuck out. Don’t even try me. I don’t—I don’t have *time* for this.” His voice cracks suddenly, and Sapnap looks on in horrified fascination, trying to make sense of anything he’s saying. “Look, you still want the discs, yeah? You can *have* them. Just give L’Manberg its independence. I won’t try anything. They’re yours to keep, forever. I won’t fight you. So c’mon, you green bastard, do we have a deal?”

Throughout this speech, Dream has gone very, very still.

“More powerful things than me?” he asks. “Tommy, this is literally my server. I think you’re underestimating me here.”

“No,” Tommy says. “No, I’m really not.”

Dream stays silent for a moment. Sapnap would bet anything that underneath his mask, he’s frowning.

“Alright,” he finally says. “Show me that you have them here, and you’ve got yourself a deal.”

Sapnap would protest. He feels like he should. A couple of discs aren’t worth allowing a whole new country to form in *their* server. But Dream’s tone brooks no argument, and more than that, there’s definitely something wrong with Tommy, something that grabs his attention and keeps it, even though he can’t put a finger on what it is. So he just watches as Tommy brings his enderchest out of his inventory, and pulls out two music discs, staring at them both for a long second.

And then, he holds them out toward Dream.

“The discs for L’Manberg,” he repeats, and his voice is colorless.

“The discs for L’Manberg,” Dream replies, and takes the discs from Tommy’s hand. Tommy jerks his arm back quickly, face going pale as a sheet as he stumbles a bit.

“Don’t,” he says, and he’s shaking, shaking *hard*, “don’t you fucking, don’t fucking touch—”

Sapnap’s not sure what the issue is. Dream’s fingers might have brushed Tommy’s when he accepted the discs, maybe, but he doesn’t know why that would cause such a reaction. Dream freezes in place, startled, and it’s impossible to tell where he’s looking, so Sapnap exchanges another glance with George and steps forward, intending to calm Tommy down, perhaps, to guide him out of the base so he can get back home. Maybe he’ll walk him himself; he’s not sure he trusts the kid not to get eaten by a zombie on the way, in the state he’s in.

But Tommy wheels on him, stabbing a shaking finger at him, and he stops in his tracks.

“*Don’t*,” he says, and he’s near tears, barely getting the words out, and Sapnap feels so lost. “Don’t get near me, just, just fuck off, why don’t you?”

“You’re in our base!” he says incredulously. “Tommy, what is *up* with you?”

Tommy just shakes his head. His eyes drift back over to Dream, and the discs in his hand. His face contorts, and Sapnap can’t even begin to interpret the expression he’s making, something sad and angry and desperate all at once, but with something else, something... weird. Everything about this is weird, though, and he doesn’t particularly want to admit that he’s slightly worried about TommyInnit, but frankly, he’s not sure he has a choice.

Because he’s slightly worried about TommyInnit.

“It’s for the best,” Tommy says, quietly, as if to himself, but his voice sounds so wrecked that Sapnap’s first instinct is actually to give him a hug. It’s easy enough to refrain, but still. “It’s for the, it’s for the best. For L’Manberg. It’s, um—” He glances up, right at Dream’s mask, and flinches again. “Right. I’d say it was a pleasure doing business with you, but it never is. Bye, Dream.”

And then he’s backing out the entrance, and he’s gone.

“Bye, Tommy,” Dream says, somewhat belatedly, and then they all stand there in silence for a good two minutes. Dream turns the discs over and over in his hands, a repetitive motion. Sapnap recognizes it for what it is—a self-soothing mechanism, something to calm himself with. He’s rattled.

“So, that was really weird, right?” George says, and Sapnap lets out a long breath.

“Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, I’d say that was weird, George.” And then he whirls on Dream. “And you! Are you serious right now? You’re just going to, what, let them make their country, just like that? Over a couple of discs? Seriously?”

Dream takes a moment before replying, and when he does, his voice is low, considering.

“I want to see where this goes,” he says. “I didn’t see this coming. I didn’t think that Tommy would be willing to give up these discs for—well, for anything. And the fact that he did this on his own? Without even telling anyone? You’re right, it’s weird. I want to figure it out.” He shrugs, posture untensing. The discs vanish into his inventory. “Besides, I have the discs now, which means I have power over him. And we can always declare war again later if we want. I promised him L’Manberg’s freedom, not that they would get to keep it.”

He frowns. “I guess.”

Power over Tommy. Normally, he’d agree. Holding the discs over his head in the past has worked wonders. But the way Tommy looked, the way he came to them of his own volition, suggested giving up the discs himself—something about him has changed, and Sapnap’s no longer sure that it will be that simple. Because sure, his face when he gave them up was agonized, but then there was everything else, too, everything he said, the way he was acting, like he thought there was some bigger threat on the horizon, and that it wasn’t Dream.

Weird. Just, so weird.

“Alright, I guess we see how this goes, then,” George says.

“Yeah, we’ll see how it goes,” he echoes, and wonders why the words inspire such dread in him.

They go back to their movie. But though they sit together again, pressed into each other’s sides, none of them relax. The tension in the room does not leave, and he knows that none of them are paying attention to the movie at all, that all of them are lost in their own thoughts, and he resents it, a bit. He wants that easy camaraderie back. Wants his *friends*, his friends and simpler times, before war, before discs, before Tommy-fucking-Innit and all the rest of them. Just him and Dream and George, messing around, doing what they want, making a server into a home.

Simpler times seem like a long way away. Sapnap thinks about it long into the early morning, long after the credits stop rolling, and can’t come to a conclusion that satisfies him. Can’t find peace. He doesn’t think the other two can, either.

But then, he’s not sure what else he expected. Sometimes, he thinks he’s forgotten what peace means.

Chapter End Notes

Another thing that's going to be very important is the fact that we are currently in the very early days of the war for independence. As in, we're pre-Eret betrayal, pre-Niki showing up, pre-Wilbur starting to spiral, all of that. That's gonna be super relevant. :D

My [tumblr is here](#), if you'd like to stop by! And seriously, thank you all so, so much for the feedback and the kudos you've given me so far! It's the best possible motivation I could ask for!

Next up, Chapter Three: In which Wilbur gets hit with a lot of new information very early in the morning, and frankly, he's not sure what to think.

Wilbur

Chapter Notes

How we feeling, folks? I have to say, trying to characterize L'Manberg-era Wilbur in the midst of everything that's currently happening in canon has felt completely bizarre. Hope he comes across well lol

Content warnings this chapter for swearing and mentioned (hypothetical) injury and death.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur oversleeps.

He doesn't mean to. He never means to. But he does, and when he wakes up and finds the sun halfway to its peak, definitely mid-morning rather than the predawn he was hoping to find, it serves as a shock to his system, and all he can think is, *shit*. Because sure, he's been pretty fucking exhausted lately, but that's no excuse. He's supposed to be the leader here, and leaders can't lead when they're sleeping.

And gods above know what Tommy's managed to get into this morning, or what Dream's done, because Dream's been suspiciously quiet over the past few days and there could be an attack at any moment now, and shit, shit, *shit*.

He fumbles his way through dressing, tries to neaten his hair, fails utterly, and gives up and pulls his beanie on over it. Not very professional, but it's fine. This is fine. He can't hear any screams, so nobody's dying. Probably.

He steps outside of the hastily-constructed house he claimed for his own, and it's less of a house, really, than a single room with walls and a roof liable to cave in at any second, but it serves for now, and he never claimed to possess his father's building prowess. There will be time for infrastructure development after independence is secured. But he steps outside, squinting against the sunlight, and finds—everything in order. Everything looks fine. Nothing is on fire, except for the ever-burning camarvan. The walls still stand.

That should be his next step. The walls.

He climbs his way up, surveying the area. The surrounding lands appear just as they were left last night. No ominous structures set up. No fucking TNT cannons. All is calm, peaceful, and

he has learned not to trust peace, these past few weeks, but if everything is alright for now, he'll accept it gladly. Even if it doesn't last.

He sighs, bracing his hands against the battlements. All too often, these days, he's found his mind wandering down paths they never would have before. He can't help but wonder what Phil would think if he knew the full extent of what he's up to. His father tried so hard, when he was younger, to shield him from war, from the legacy that he and his best friend laid out behind them. And Wilbur cannot blame him for that protectiveness; his first experience of war has only been a few weeks long, and he's finding he doesn't care for it, even if he's discovered a knack for tactics.

The thing is, though, he's always wanted a legacy of his own.

Phil always said that it would be through his music. He never told him that he had his doubts about that, that he loves his songs but that something in him always calls for more, something just out of reach, just beyond the crest of the next hill. He's not sure his father knows how ambitious he really is, in the end.

He should probably write him. He'll do it after the war is over. After he has a country to invite him to see. After he's built something that his dad will be proud of. And if he leaves out the struggle it took to get it, nobody has to know but him, because it's certainly better that Phil doesn't.

"Hello, Wilbur," Dream says, right by his ear, and he jerks, pulling his sword from his inventory in an instinctive motion. How he missed the bastard's approach, he has no idea, but Dream is standing right *there*, right on the walls next to him, covered head to toe in netherite armor, smiling mask firmly affixed to his face. He holds no weapons yet, but Wilbur knows all too well how quickly that can change.

"You're trespassing on L'Manberg property," he snaps, trying to disguise the frantic racing of his heart. His feet shift into a ready stance, a movement that's old hat by now, both from this war and from Technoblade's training when he was a kid, even though the sword will never be his weapon of choice. "With armor on, too. You're not allowed to wear armor within our borders."

He doesn't know why he bothers to try. Dream won't obey. He never does. That's why they're at war in the first place.

But then, to his shock, Dream chuckles, inclining his head. And then, piece by piece, the armor disappears, accompanied by the familiar *clink* of metal landing in an inventory slot.

"Right, right," Dream says, as if he hasn't just blown all of Wilbur's expectations out of the water. "Of course. I guess I really should be trying to get off on the right foot with you, here. Congratulations, by the way. I'm sure you were happy to hear the news."

What is he—?

What is this? Is he trying psychological warfare now? Is that what this is? Because Wilbur has absolutely no idea what he's talking about. Is he supposed to know what he's talking

about? Dream's acting like he should know what he's talking about, and he doesn't particularly want to give him the upper hand by revealing that he does not, in fact, have any idea what he's talking about.

"Thank you," he manages, a beat too late, but Dream doesn't seem to notice, just continues on blithely.

"I just figured we should set up an official meeting of some kind," he says. "One country leader to another. Get some peace treaties drawn up, write some trade agreements, draw some official boundaries, all of that stuff. I'll admit, I've never done any of that before, but it can't be too hard, right?"

"Right, I'm sure," Wilbur replies, nodding along. Because, *what?*

"It doesn't have to be right away," Dream continues, and he just *keeps talking*. "I can give you a day or two to settle in, get stuff in order. There's no real rush, but we should get it done soon. I don't want to leave anything up in the air. That's not the kind of thing that promotes stability."

"Of course," he says.

Dream goes to say something else, and then stops, tilting his head again. This time, it's less mocking, more curious. "You do know what I'm talking about, right?" he says, and the game is up. Wilbur feels caught, but he breathes deeply, fights off his rising blush, gathers up all his composure.

"I'll be entirely honest," he says. "I've got no idea what the shit you're on about right now."

He's not expecting that to make Dream laugh. But he does, tossing his head back and carrying on, loud and long, and then it devolves into a tea kettle wheeze. Genuine amusement, then, though at what, Wilbur isn't sure. He doesn't appreciate being laughed at, but he can't help but feel like there's something going on here that's going straight over his head. He doesn't appreciate that very much, either.

"Oh my god," Dream manages, as soon as he's capable of speech, mirth still dancing in his voice, "he didn't *tell* you? Still?"

Something icy gets its claws around his heart.

"Who didn't tell me?" he demands. "Who didn't tell me what?"

"Tommy," Dream answers, and those claws *squeeze*. His heart skips several beats, and suddenly, he's casting back in his mind to the last time he saw Tommy. It was last night, wasn't it? Just last night? He sent him to bed, because Tommy often tries to take late watches, claims himself capable, but he's not even quite sixteen yet. Wilbur may have pulled him into a war, but he's still a teenager, and Wilbur's going to do his damndest to make sure he comes out of this as intact as possible. And that means getting enough sleep.

He looked fine, last night. He was fine. He has to be fine.

He's moving before he realizes it, his hand fisting in the front of Dream's hoodie.

"If you've done something to Tommy, I'm tossing you off this wall right here and now," he snarls. "Don't test me, Dream."

A year ago, a month ago, he never would have pictured himself making a threat like that. Never would have imagined himself capable of following through. But he is different, now, from the way he started, different already, and there is a part of him, a part of him that whispers to him in crows' voices, that is scared of what he will be by the time the war is done.

"I haven't done anything to Tommy!" Dream protests, raising both hands, though he sounds unconcerned. "I swear, I haven't. He gave us a really good chance to, last night, but we didn't take it. You should thank us for that. It was pretty stupid, what he did."

"Explain," he demands. "Explain right now."

Tommy's a resourceful kid. He can picture him getting himself in and out of an altercation easily. But the way Dream says it, it's like he put himself in the situation in the first place, like he sought it out, and what the hell was Tommy even doing, outside of the walls so late at night? The walls are there for a reason. The walls are there for protection. The walls are there to keep his people *safe*, because maybe he didn't exactly set out to start a country, in the very beginning, but he's going to see it through. By all the gods, he's going to see it through.

If, that is, this kid doesn't give him a heart attack first.

Dream shoves at his hand, and he lets him go without an argument. Dream takes a step back, putting a bit more space between them, and then leans against the wall.

"Tommy came to us last night," he says, "and traded his discs for L'Manberg's independence."

It's a simple sentence. A very simple sentence. But somehow, the words don't make any sense.

"Congratulations, President Soot," Dream says, and he knows, he *knows* the bastard is smiling under that mask. "I look forward to establishing relations between our countries," and he isn't, Wilbur knows that he isn't, but he's enjoying this because he's just dropped a bomb on him and he knows it, because—

"Leave," he rasps. "Get out."

Dream does a little salute, short and mocking, and then hops over the side of the wall. Wilbur hopes he takes damage, hopes he breaks his fucking *legs*. The sound of water hitting the ground tells him that he doesn't. He can't even be upset about it, because his heart has jumped into his throat, pounding in his ears, and all of the words were fine individually, but all together, they're too much to process.

Tommy gave up his discs. And now L'Manberg is free. Just like that, the war is over. And Tommy gave up his discs. Tommy walked straight into enemy territory without telling him and handed over his most prized possessions, all for the sake of L'Manberg's independence. And he succeeded. He got it. He sacrificed something dear to him, something that Wilbur never would have asked him to give up, and he did it for them. For L'Manberg.

Giddiness is the first emotion that fills him, and next is pride. Because this—this is above and beyond. He never would have asked Tommy to trade away something so important to him, but somehow, he found it within himself to do it, and he got what he wanted from it. He got what they all wanted. Somehow, Tommy managed to end their struggles in one fell swoop, and they're not related, neither by blood nor by adoption or anything like that, but Wilbur thinks that this must be the sort of pride an older brother feels when watching the younger grow up, watching the younger go on and accomplish great things.

They are free, and it is because of Tommy. He feels like he's on cloud nine. He feels like he could fly.

And then reality crashes back in.

Tommy didn't tell him that he was planning this. Tommy didn't tell him, might not have told anyone at all, and that means he strolled straight into the arms of their bitter enemies, people who might have killed him without a second thought. No one has died yet, and he always intended to keep it that way, but the thought of Tommy alone, at night, creeping his way into the belly of the beast, sends a chill down his spine.

Tommy could have died. Tommy could have died, and he wouldn't have known until he woke up this morning, woke up *late*, and saw the message on his comm. *TommyInnit was slain by Dream.*

And then, another thought occurs to him: Tommy hasn't come to him. Hasn't come to brag, hasn't even come to just tell him, to tell him that he's just single-handedly won their independence. And that is not a Tommy-like thing to do, to let something like that go unremarked upon.

Something is wrong. Dream might have lied. He could have hurt Tommy. Tommy could be injured right now. He doesn't even know for sure that he made it back.

Tommy gave up his discs for L'Manberg.

It still barely makes any sense to him. But there's no time to make sense of it. He rushes back down the wall as quickly as he can manage, and then it's off through their settlement, eyes darting around, hoping for a glimpse of him. He checks Tommy's house, first, the ramshackle, makeshift thing he's been sharing with Tubbo until they can get better buildings erected, and he's not there, and Tubbo isn't either. The camarvan turns up nothing. He's considering leaving L'Manberg entirely, going to check by Tommy's other house, the one built into the hill, when Tubbo comes up beside him.

"Morning, Wilbur," he says, and then frowns. "You alright, man? You're kind of pale."

“Tubbo,” he says, and grabs him by the shoulders. Maybe a bit too emphatically, because he suddenly looks a bit alarmed, but he’ll be concerned with that later. “Tubbo, have you seen Tommy today?”

Tubbo’s frown deepens. “I was coming to see if you knew where he was,” he says. “He was being a bit off last night. Think he had a nightmare or something. But he’s not with you?”

“No, he’s not.” With every word out of Tubbo’s mouth, he feels his own panic grow. It is one thing for Tommy to hatch some sort of plot and not tell him. That is—well, it’s not *fine*, but Tommy doesn’t tell him everything. But to keep Tubbo out of the loop? To, presumably, visit him before leaving and yet still not tell Tubbo what was going on? It’s unlike him. Very unlike him.

“Okay, well, he’s got to be around here somewhere,” Tubbo reasons, his brows creased. “L’Manberg’s only so big. Should we go look for him together, then?”

“Right,” he says. He breathes, in and out. Tubbo’s a good kid. Very sensible. Very down to earth. And he’s right, of course. Tommy has to be around here somewhere. Any other possibility is out of the question. “Right, of course, let’s go look.”

So they do. They take a systematic approach, first checking all the most likely places and then combing every inch of their land in a grid formation. Tubbo’s suggestion, again. But that turns up nothing, either, and he can feel the panic creeping back in, because what if he actually didn’t make it home? What if he was out there in the dead of night, distraught and alone, and something took advantage of that? What if some mob looked at him and recognized him for an easy kill?

He’s not dead. He can’t be dead. There would have been a notification. But he could be injured somewhere, incapacitated, in pain and all *alone*, and he can’t let that happen, can’t let Tommy be hurt like that on his watch—

“Oh, wait,” Tubbo says, and pulls on his sleeve. “There he is.”

Wilbur jerks, and stares in the direction he’s pointing. And sure enough, Tommy’s there, right in front of the caravan, and Eret too, it looks like. He doesn’t think he’s ever felt relief as pure as in this moment.

“Gods,” he breathes, and starts toward them, calling out, “Tommy!” And as he approaches, he gets the sense that something is off.

The first thing he notices is Eret’s expression. Pure, unbridled confusion, mixed with what perhaps might be something like anxiety. And the reason for that is clear enough: Tommy is holding their face very firmly in his hands. Which is bizarre, and Wilbur blinks a few times to make sure he’s seeing this right, because Tommy doesn’t—he doesn’t just *do* that. That is a gesture reserved only for people he is very, very close to. Tubbo gets that treatment. He’s been on the receiving end a couple of times himself, but not often. And he knows that Tommy and Eret get along just fine, are friends, just like all of them are, but he really didn’t think that the two of them were close enough for this. And judging by the look on Eret’s face, they didn’t think so either.

And Tommy is just standing there. Not speaking, not doing anything else. Just staring Eret in the eyes—or the glasses, rather—with a startling intensity.

“Tommy?” he asks, as soon as he’s close enough that he doesn’t have to shout. “Is everything alright?”

And Tommy startles. Withdraws his hands from Eret’s face as though he’s been burned. Turns to look at him, and Wilbur freezes in place, because just for a second—

There is fear on Tommy’s face.

He doesn’t understand what could have caused it. But it is undoubtedly there, only for a moment before it is smoothed away into something more neutral, if strained. And he hates it, hates it viscerally. He never wants Tommy to look at him with that expression on his face. It makes him feel sick to his stomach.

“Ayup,” Tommy says, and his voice sounds—rough. Like he hasn’t slept at all. “Morning Wil, Tubso.”

It’s casual. Far too casual for what Wilbur has just learned, for the panic he’s felt for the past half hour or so, unable to find this kid, this kid who is basically his brother, for all he pretends to protest against the moniker. Tommy is his family. Tommy is his family, and he risked everything last night, gave up everything for the sake of *Wilbur’s* everything, his grand ideals, his great vision, and now he’s standing there like nothing at all has changed.

“Ayup, Tommy,” Tubbo says. “You feeling any better this morning?”

At Tommy’s side, Eret shifts uneasily. Their expression is still one of concern, and Wilbur wonders exactly how long Tommy had been standing there like that, or what their interaction even was to get them to that point in the first place. It’s confusing. He’s confused.

“I’m great,” Tommy says, and—no, no, they’re not going to do this.

“Tommy,” he breaks in, and Tommy stiffens. “Tommy, last night, why did you—you just—why wouldn’t you tell me?”

It’s not quite what he should be asking, but it’s what comes out. And his voice is annoyingly desperate, and he hates showing off so many emotions like this, especially in a public space, but he can’t stop himself.

“What about last night?” Tubbo asks.

“Last night?” Eret echoes, and looks to Tommy, who blinks, his gaze darting between the three of them but landing on Wilbur most of all, and it’s like he’s nervous, almost, anxious about how he’s going to react, and—does he think he’s going to be angry about this? Perhaps he is, but only in the sense that he’s angry that Tommy took such a stupid risk. Below that anger, that anger born of fear, his pride burns bright. Surely, Tommy must know that?

“I—look, I knew you’d say no, alright?” he says. “But I knew that I could do it, so I did it. Simple as that.”

Simple as that, he says. As if he didn't give up his greatest possessions. As if he didn't win them the war, win them their freedom, win for them the reality of the values that this country was founded upon.

"What's going on?" Eret asks.

"Yeah, does this have something to do with what you were saying to me the other night?" Tubbo says, and then looks at him. "Wilbur, what are you talking about? What happened last night?"

Tommy sighs, and says nothing. Wilbur swallows, and maintains eye contact with him as he speaks, searching for some kind of reaction.

"Dream came to me this morning," he says, and does not miss Tommy's flinch at the name, "not even an hour ago. He said—he said that we were free. That the war was over, that L'Manberg was its own nation, that he wanted to set up a meeting for diplomatic ties and whatnot. He called me the president. And, um, he said that you won it for us, Tommy." He pauses, just for a moment, trying to get his emotions under control. He mostly fails. "He said that you came to him, last night, and you traded your discs to him for L'Manberg's freedom."

"You did *what*?"

Tubbo's voice is dismayed and disbelieving all at once. And Tommy flinches, draws into himself a little, and that's not the reaction Wilbur would have expected, but literally none of this is what he would have expected.

"Yeah," he says, sounding quiet, a bit defeated. "Yeah, I—I did. I knew he'd take the deal. And I just wanted—I wanted the war to be over, yeah? Before anybody got hurt. And I knew this would work, so I just went and did it."

"You couldn't have, though," he finds himself saying, before he even know what he's going to say next. "Maybe you could've guessed that he'd go for it, but—Tommy, what if they'd killed you? Taken what they wanted and killed you right then and there? I just—" He breaks off, running a hand through his hair, remembering too late that he's got his beanie on. His fingers dislodge it, and he readjusts it with more fervor than is necessary. "I just can't believe you did that without telling someone. Without telling—" *Me*, he wants to say, but holds himself back. No matter his feelings regarding Tommy, the deep respect and even deeper love that has grown in him over the course of their friendship, he doesn't have a monopoly on Tommy's attention. Perhaps he would have preferred for Tommy to tell him, but he'd have settled for Tommy telling *anyone*.

"What, are you worried?" Tommy says, and Wilbur only spares a second to wonder why he sounds so disbelieving, because—

"Yes," he bursts out. "Gods, Tommy! Dream came to me with this and my first thought was that you'd died! Or that you hadn't made it back, that you were out there somewhere, alone and needing help, and I didn't—Tommy. Tommy, please tell me you thought of this. Please tell me, tell me that you were prepared, at least. Tell me that you—" He cuts himself off again, shaking his head hard, and under any other circumstance, he would be kicking himself

for the display, for the outburst of emotion, for the lack of eloquence, but he thinks he can be excused for the moment.

Tommy's mouth works for a second.

"Oh," he finally says, weakly. "Um, right. Sorry, Wilbur. No, I had it handled, trust me. Sorry, I didn't, um. Didn't mean to scare you like that. Sort of just—did it, y'know?"

"It's okay," he says, even though it kind of isn't, because Tommy's continued to shrink into himself, and he doesn't want that. "It's okay, Tommy, I'm just glad you're okay. And, gods above, what you did—" He steps forward, then, unable to help himself, and takes Tommy by the shoulders. Tommy stares at him with wide eyes. "I never would have asked that of you. I couldn't believe it when Dream told me. And Tommy, I—I'm so, so sorry. But I am so damn proud of you. You hear me? So damn proud. I know what that must have taken, for you to do that. And I'm so fucking proud of you." He smiles, then, wide and a bit watery. He's not going to cry, he's *not*, but emotion is rising up in his throat, thick and overpowering. "You did it, Tommy. You won us L'Manberg."

Tommy returns the smile, if a bit tentatively. "Yeah," he says, "I guess I did, didn't I?" And then, the smile widens, and he puffs out his chest, putting his hands on his hips. "I hear that makes me the leader now. You're speaking to Mister High President King Lord Innit, so show me the respect you owe me, eh?"

"Absolutely the fuck not," he replies, but he's laughing. "No, no, enough out of you, go, take Tubbo and go get yourself whatever you want out of our rations, you've fucking earned it, Toms."

Tommy offers him one last grin, and then he ducks out of his grip, grabbing Tubbo's hand and dragging him in the direction of their storage. He can hear Tubbo's voice already, high and offended at the fact that Tommy went and did this without telling him, and perhaps all is right with the world after all. Some things do not change, even when everything else does.

He went to sleep last night a rebel, a general. He woke up a president. How about that?

"Do you think he's alright?" Eret asks, and he starts, almost having forgotten they were there.

"Probably not," he admits. "Not entirely. Those discs meant a lot to him. But we've got time to figure it out." He turns to them, then, makes eye contact with himself in the reflection of their sunglasses. "What was he doing with you, before we walked up?"

"I'm not entirely sure," they reply. "He came up to me, sort of yelling a bit? Punched me in the shoulder a few times. Couldn't figure out what that was about. Then he thanked me for something, and then he hugged me, which was a bit odd, and then he did the, uh, thing, with the holding my face? And then you and Tubbo arrived. I honestly don't know what any of that was about at all."

He hums, and looks out after the boys, at their retreating backs. As he watches, Tommy slings an arm around Tubbo's shoulders, his other hand gesticulating wildly.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” he says softly. “It’s Tommy. He makes it his job to be unpredictable.”

“You’re right about that,” Eret says. “I suppose congratulations are in order, President Soot?”

President Soot. It’s got a nice ring to it. He is the leader of a free country now, and it is thanks to the kid he sees as a younger brother, whether he’ll admit as much out loud or not. He is the leader of a free country, and that means there is much work to be done.

But he gives himself a moment longer, and smiles at the way the midday sun shines in Tommy’s hair.

It’s all for them, after all. Land is just land; as long as he can give his loved ones the freedom they deserve, that’s enough for him.

Chapter End Notes

The plot thickens. :D

The response to this fic so far has been amazing, truly, thank you all so much! Feel free to leave kudos and/or a comment if you enjoyed; I thrive on feedback! Also, [my tumblr is here](#) if you'd like to chat, or to see some of my nonsensical rambling.

Next up, Chapter Four: In which Eret has a strange dream, and is just very confused all around. Tommy... does not exactly help with this.

Eret

Chapter Notes

Eret chapter on first day of Pride pog!!

Content warnings this chapter for swearing, blood, mentioned death, and perhaps mild unreality? Not sure on that one, but I thought I'd mention it to be safe.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“They’re here.”

The words are said in her own voice. She does not remember willing her mouth to move. She does not remember how she got here, nor where here is. Inside, somewhere, for sure; her surroundings are blurry, twist and warp everywhere she looks, and it’s confusing, dizzying. The air is hazy, clouded with smoke and drifting sparks, flickering on a hot, dry wind, and a film of red has descended on her vision, as if her glasses are tinted. She doesn’t know what’s happening, nor why she spoke, but even as she listens to the words, she is certain of their veracity, a deep, dark dread pooling in her chest. They are coming. They are coming for her, and for everyone else.

She is scared. It is a wide, unfocused, fear; she can’t seem to concentrate enough to figure out what or who she’s scared of, what or who *they* are. The details slip away when she tries to grasp them, and the act of thinking feels like wading through thick mud. Her thoughts are foggy, unfocused, and she can barely feel her own body, like she’s a passenger in her own skin.

But she is scared. Her skin buzzes with it, with a pure, unadulterated terror, with the sensation of running out of time.

“We knew they’d find us,” someone says. They—no, he, *he* feels right in a way she can’t explain—he stands next to her, though she cannot turn her head to look. His voice is familiar to her as summer rains, the crunch of a footstep on sand, the ring of a pickaxe on gold, but she does not know him. “We knew this was inevitable. I’d hoped for more time, but—”

He is scared, too. She can hear it in his voice, and every inch of her aches to soothe him.

“We won’t be able to win this,” she hears herself say instead. “Not against all of them.” Her voice pauses. “Not this time.”

“Who’s here?” a new voice says, lighter than the first, accented differently, reverberating with an echo that wedges in her bones, empty and unnatural. Their presence feels like an absence. “Do we have visitors?”

“Enemies, more like,” the first voice says.

“Ah,” says the second. “I’ll go tell them to fuck right off, then.” A pause, and then, “Is Techno coming?”

A name she knows but doesn’t. A face flashes in her mind’s eye, and once gone, she cannot remember it.

“Maybe,” says the first. “Why don’t you go see? And if he’s not, you can go ahead and, um, tell them to fuck right off. That’ll be really helpful.”

There is a blur of motion in the corner of her eye, someone passing out of the room, though they are soundless, and the air does not change with their leaving. She still cannot turn to look.

“He’s not what he was,” she hears herself say. “He won’t be able to hold them.”

“I know,” the other says, and there is defeat in his tone, heavy and terrible. She wants to take his hand. She wants to look into his eyes. She wants to know who he is. She can do none of those things. “I know. There’s nothing else we can do now. Are you ready for this? What you were telling me about?”

She feels herself swallow past a lump in her throat. “Ready enough to try,” she says, and her voice is choked. “But I don’t—”

“Hey, hey, hey,” he says, and then, he is in front of her, and he is right there, but her eyes will not focus, and every time she blinks, she forgets his features, forgets—but she cannot retain them long enough to describe them, even to herself, and she’s left with nothing, like trying to snatch at dying embers before they go cold and turn to dust. She thinks she could cry with the frustration of it, and she still doesn’t *understand*, has no idea why she wants to know so badly, why this is so important to her. “It’s all gonna be okay.”

“It won’t be,” she says. “I didn’t want it to end like this.”

“Neither did I, old pal.” There are lips on her forehead, a gentle kiss. She leans into it, wants to keep the memory of it forever. “Don’t think of it as an ending. Just a—a see you later.”

She laughs, unhappily. “There won’t be a later.”

“Maybe not,” he says softly. “But I’d like to think that’s not true.”

There is a sound, then, a noise like a shriek and a cry and a grinding of metal against metal, discordant and clanging, and it’s as if it punches her in the throat. She gasps for breath, the air suddenly too thin to sustain her, and past the sound, the terrible sound, the sound that is drawing closer, some destructive thing on the hunt, she hears his voice: “We’re out of time.”

Behind her. There is someone behind her. She turns, and her vision flares with red, but she can make out blond hair, blue eyes, something small and pink held in their arms, clutched to them desperately, protectively, and then the world is tilting, blurring and changing, and the turns again and she is kneeling, her knees on hard stone, and she knows, she knows that

something awful is happening, and they're out of time, they're all out of time, and her hands mark the ground with desperate, rushed motions, smearing paint—no, blood. She doesn't know how she knows that, but she does, and her motions, too, are beyond her control.

And yet, they feel natural. Like something buried in her rising up to the surface. She has no idea what she's doing, even though her body does, and yet, and yet—

The universe hums at her fingertips, and it is as familiar as her own name.

"Eret," someone gasps, someone pleads, "Eret, what're you—he's still *up* there, we have to go get him—"

"He's buying us time," she manages, her voice distant to her own ears. The next words that she says are not comprehensible to her, power vibrating through them, something other, something wrong and yet right all at once, and the blood—it is her blood—begins to glow, shimmer with a silver-red light, and she can barely look at the patterns she's made, her mind skittering off of them like a rock skipped across a pond; she'll sink if she lets herself.

"Eret, please," they say.

She stops her chanting. The spell is set. Half of her feels calm, serene. The other half of her feels like she's screaming.

"I couldn't save anyone else," she says. "I'm sorry. But I can do this, at least."

"Wh—*Eret!*"

Alarm, true alarm, fear, and she meets their eyes. His eyes. His face solidifies, sharpens, becomes clear. His eyes are duller, his hair streaked with white, his face scarred. But it's Tommy. Too old and too young all at once.

The glow brightens, illuminates the contours of his face. Lights up the room. Warms her skin.

Tommy screams.

The world rips, or perhaps she is ripping the world, but she is falling, falling back and away, falling out of herself and a void is underneath but not in time for her to escape, the world is imploding but there are footsteps, there is someone shouting, and someone yanks her head back by the hair, and there is a sharp slide of a blade across her neck, a gush of something hot, and then *pain*, and—

Eret wakes up choking.

He sits bolt upright, hands flying to his neck, pawing at it, pressing it, trying to stem a flow of blood that does not exist, close a wound that is not there. It takes several full minutes for his body to convince his brain that he is whole and unharmed, that he is neither bleeding out from a blade to his throat nor tumbling into some vast emptiness as the world destructs around him, destructs from something *he* did—

What *was* that?

Slowly, he calms, regulates his breathing, but not all of the panic leaves him, adrenaline flooding his veins and setting him shaking. He takes his hands down from his throat, stares at them; they tremble, but there is no blood painting them.

That is, perhaps, the most vivid dream he has ever had. And also perhaps the most frustrating. He can't say he's ever had one like it, where he felt like he was trapped within himself, unable to affect his own actions, spouting off words that he had no context for.

He shudders, suddenly, a full-body convulsion.

Air. He needs air.

It's the dead of night, it seems. L'Manberg is quiet, peaceful, enjoying her first night of true independence. It's still a bit hard for him to believe, that it was won just like that, and by Tommy, no less. He was prepared for the conflict to stretch out a lot longer, little though he liked the idea. But now, it's all over, and they have to figure out how to proceed. Or at least, Wilbur does; Wilbur is still in charge, president now rather than general. He's not sure how he feels about that.

He likes Wilbur. Rather a lot, actually. But sometimes, it concerns him, how much Wilbur seems to enjoy power.

Though he'd be lying if he said he didn't enjoy the thought of having a little power himself, power to protect anyone he chooses, to lead if need be, so perhaps he's just a hypocrite.

All thoughts for later, though. For now, the night air is a balm on his face, fresh and free, and he breathes in deeply. The world is fine. He is fine. He can even imagine where the dream came from; Tommy was acting so very strangely yesterday, and he's been stressed in general, so it's not hard to figure that his mind conjured up some outer manifestation of it, some representation of the way he feared everything would come crumbling in around them. Dreams are tricky things. It's never wise to put too much stock in them.

The one thing he can't push aside was the other person. Not Tommy, and not the one who left. The one who kissed his forehead, called him a friend. He's not sure why his mind would invent someone when he has plenty of friends here to fill the role, and something about it unsettles him. Because the depth of attachment he felt for this person, who he is sure he doesn't know, who he doesn't recognize at all, was frightening, almost, in its intensity.

And yet, it was also comforting. Familiar. Safe.

Absently, he reaches up and touches his forehead. He's reading too far into this, to be sure. But he can't help but wonder who he was, even if he was just an invention of his troubled, tired brain.

He sighs, and decides to mount the walls. He doesn't think he'll be able to fall back asleep any time soon, so he may as well have a decent view. May as well help keep watch, even though they supposedly don't really need to anymore. He's not sure he'll trust this peace until the documents are all drawn up and signed, but hopefully Dream is a man of his word. Hopefully he is one that keeps his promises.

The night is peaceful, and there's a cool wind blowing from the north. He turns his face into it, breathing deeply, and that is when he sees it: movement. A figure on the ground, moving slowly but steadily toward the walls. He leans further out, trying to get a better look; is this something he should raise the alarm over? One person probably can't do a lot, unless that person is Dream. He hopes it's not Dream.

He squints as the figure approaches. They really are making a beeline for the walls, and there's no indication that they've seen him. He wonders if he should call out, make them aware that they've been observed. Would that dissuade a potential troublemaker?

And then, the figure gets close enough for him to make out details. Rumpled red and white t-shirt, blond hair. It's unmistakably Tommy. Which begs a new question: what is Tommy doing outside L'Manberg's borders so late at night?

He did the same last night, from what Eret gathered. Went to Dream and traded his discs for L'Manberg's freedom. A risky ploy, one that he's surprised actually worked, but he supposes he's been underestimating the value that this discs have to many people on the server. He wasn't here for the onset of the wars over them. Still, he admires the sacrifice that Tommy made, even if he can't make heads or tails of that interaction they had yesterday.

But then, Tommy's always been a bit of a strange kid. This was a new kind of strange, but he's fifteen going on sixteen years old, and he's proven himself to be resilient. He's sure everything is fine.

As he muses, Tommy clambers his way up the wall, and once he's up, he just stands there for a second, leaning against one of the parapets. His face is pinched, lined with exhaustion and something else, something that Eret can't quite interpret in the dim light of the stars. He seems preoccupied, caught up within himself and whatever he was doing, and Eret considers letting him go without saying a word. But concern wins out over that, and he clears his throat. Tommy jerks, wheeling on him violently, lips slightly parted.

"Hey, Tommy," he says, raising a hand to placate him. "Sorry, didn't mean to startle you."

"You didn't startle me," Tommy says. "I'm unstartleable."

He smiles, inclining his head. "I'm not sure that's a word."

"Don't patronize me," Tommy says. "What're you doing up here?"

“Unsettled dreams, I’m afraid,” he says. He sees no reason to hide it, and perhaps admitting to a bit of weakness will put Tommy more at ease. Currently, he’s holding himself tense as a bowstring. “I came out to get a bit of air. What about you? Any particular reason to go for a stroll this time of night?” He cuts himself off before he can say something stupid, such as, *I’m sure Wilbur wouldn’t be happy to know you’re out and about this late*. Because while that is the truth, and he’s sure Tommy knows it, knows that the man is protective over him like he is over practically nothing else, he’s also sure that Tommy’s independent spirit wouldn’t appreciate him pointing that out.

“No,” Tommy bites out. “No reason at all.”

That is so clearly a lie that it’s almost insulting. But he takes one look at Tommy’s closed off posture, the jut of his chin, and decides to leave it. What’s most important is that Tommy is back safe; he won’t pressure him to reveal something he’s not comfortable with sharing.

“Alright, then,” he says. “You’re welcome to join me, if you’d like.”

Tommy shoots him a scathing glare at that. But to his surprise, he then walks over, a bit hesitantly, and joins him in bracing himself against the ramparts, staring out over the surrounding countryside. He doesn’t say anything else, and Eret tries to study him without making it obvious.

“I think it’s pretty amazing, what you did,” he says. “I can’t pretend to understand how difficult that was for you, but you single-handedly won us a war. You’ve probably had your fill of receiving thanks, but I think it bears repetition.”

“I know it was amazing,” Tommy says, and his voice is oddly hollow. “I’m very amazing, thank you so much.” He sighs, then, shoulders hunching a bit. “No, it just—it just needed to be done, so I did it. That’s all there was, really. Not even sure if it’ll hold up. Dream’ll use them as leverage if he thinks he can get away with it, and then we’ll have a whole other mess of problems.”

“Do you think he’ll keep his word?” he finds himself asking. Perhaps it’s the maturity Tommy seems to be displaying, the awareness, but he seems like the one to ask.

“Don’t know,” he says. “At this point? I hope so. He’s still got people he’s accountable to, so maybe. If not, we’ll have to kill him.”

“Right,” he replies, and wonders when death entered the picture. They knew it was a risk, of course, in war, but no one has died yet, on either side, and he rather thought that everyone was looking to keep it that way. “I pray it won’t come to that.”

Tommy snorts. “Let me tell you something, Eret,” he says. “Praying doesn’t do shit. Gods die just as easily as men do.”

That—sure is something for a teenager to say. He’s not sure why it strikes such a chord in him.

“Hope, then,” he says, and tries not to reveal that he’s rattled.

“Hope’s not much better. Unreliable, that is,” Tommy mutters, and Eret thinks that it might be time to change the subject. Otherwise, he’ll have to confront just how jaded Tommy sounds, and as much as he likes the kid, he’s really not sure that he’s the one best equipped to help him, even if Tommy would allow him to do so. Surely, someone like Tubbo or Wilbur would do better in trying to talk him through it.

“I’m not sure I understood what you were trying to thank me for, earlier,” he says. “Or yesterday, rather.”

Tommy shoots him a glance. “Don’t worry about it,” he says dismissively. “You don’t need to make it a thing. It wasn’t a thing.”

“It felt a little bit like a thing.”

“Well, it wasn’t, so piss off.” Tommy frowns, and then turns to face him fully. He turns as well, trying to show him that he has his undivided attention. “Look, it was just a, a general thank you, yeah? Enjoy it, because you’re not getting another one. But you’re not completely shit all of the time, I *guess*.” He sounds so very put upon in a way that only teenagers can, and Eret suppresses a grin. “Don’t read into it, shit head. But listen, Eret,” —His tone shifts, suddenly, going lower, more serious, and Eret leans in a bit on instinct— “you are sticking around, yeah? With us, with L’Manberg?”

“Of course,” he answers, taken off guard. “I’ve no plans to be elsewhere.”

“Good,” Tommy says. “That’s—that’s good. Not that I care if you stay or not! Don’t get ideas! But you should stick around, because we are clearly superior to everyone else on this shit server, and we’ll treat you right. Not like Dream would. Especially not like Dream would.”

“Right, yeah,” he says, sort of feeling like he’s lost the thread of this conversation, and more than a bit disconcerted at the intensity of Tommy’s words. “Don’t worry, I have no plans to go anywhere near Dream.”

“Good,” Tommy says again, and this time, he seems satisfied. Eret raises an eyebrow at him, but he just goes back to looking over the edge of the wall, and Eret shakes his head a bit, going to push his sunglasses further up his nose.

And then realizes—he’s not wearing them. Hasn’t been wearing them this whole time.

“Shit,” he hisses, and pats himself down frantically, trying to see if they’re anywhere on his person, but of course they’re not. He’s wearing his nightshirt and loose trousers, and he can picture exactly where his glasses are: sitting on the nightstand beside his bed. He didn’t think to grab them, shaken by his nightmare as he was, certain that he wouldn’t be running into anywhere else.

“What? What’s the matter?” Tommy asks, alarmed, and he realizes something else.

His eyes have been on display throughout this entire conversation, and Tommy hasn’t said a word about them. Hasn’t so much as reacted. Hasn’t so much as stared. And that—that is

foreign to him. Incomprehensible. He knows very well what his eyes bring to mind, knows very well the reasons why he chooses to hide them. Better that than to scare everyone around him away. Better to hide than to have no one. But Tommy hasn't said a word about them. He hasn't—

He doesn't know what to do with this.

“My glasses—” he stutters out. “I don't—I don't have—”

“Oh,” Tommy says, and visibly relaxes. “Yeah, did you drop 'em somewhere or something? Did they fall out of your pocket?”

That—that is not what Tommy is supposed to be asking. Eret shakes his head, but the motion brings him no clarity. He's trying to think past the drumbeat of instinctive anxiety, though it's fear that apparently has no basis, even if he doesn't know why.

“You're not scared?” he manages.

Tommy's face goes slack in surprise. Surprise, as if that's the last thing he expected Eret to be asking, but surely, *surely* he understands Eret's nerves? Surely he understands why Eret is confused? Surely—he must know, right?

And then, he sees a bit of that understanding dawn on Tommy's face, his lips forming an 'o', and Eret braces himself.

“Of what, those?” Tommy says, making a general sort of gesture. “Gonna take more than that to frighten me, big man. You've got some weird fucking eyes, but I don't see why that should bother me. And fuck anyone who is, right? They're just eyes, man. Everyone's got 'em.” He pauses. “Except for Dream, maybe. We've never seen them. He could be hiding anything under that mask. Wait, shit, what if he hasn't got any eyes? What if he doesn't have a face?”

He sounds genuinely disturbed by the line of questioning. But also, he's darting glances at Eret every now and then, as if checking to see what his response will be, and—is he trying to distract him? To calm him down, perhaps, in the most Tommy-like way possible?

Something in Eret's chest grows warm.

“As far as I know, Dream's just a guy,” he says. “I'm sure he's got a face.”

“An ugly face, maybe.”

“You—” He can't help but check. He needs to know, needs to be certain. “You really don't mind them?”

Tommy shrugs. “Nothing I haven't seen before,” he says. “They're fucking strange, and you're fucking strange, but it's alright, man. You don't—I mean, I know you, and that seems more important than anything else, yeah?” And Eret's face must be doing something at that, because Tommy scowls at him, sudden and ferocious. “No, no, I see what you're thinking, this isn't a thing either, you bastard. This isn't a thing. You're just being an idiot, so I'm correcting you. This is a correction, because I simply can't let you go on thinking things that

are wrong. You get that? I'm right and you're not and I'm telling you that. That's what this is."

"Right, of course," he says. "I wouldn't dream of claiming otherwise." He pauses. "But thank you, Tommy. Really. That kind of means a lot."

Tommy's face reddens. "Whatever," he murmurs, but he sounds unmistakably pleased. "It's fine. I'm gonna—I'm just gonna go now. G'night, Eret."

"Goodnight, Tommy," he replies, and watches as Tommy practically runs for the nearest ladder.

And he remembers his dream. Remembers Tommy looking at him with trust and terror in equal measure. Remembers the scars that dotted his face in the one second that it became clear. Remembers the tremble in his voice, and the horror in that last moment as someone came up behind them and slit his throat.

He gets a sudden, overwhelming urge to call out to him, to ask him about it. But he tamps down on it. To do so would be ridiculous, after all, and Tommy seems to have enough on his plate without him adding to it. And what would he even say? *Oh, by the way, I watched you watch me die in my dream just a bit ago. You don't think there's any meaning to that, do you?*

Because that would go over so well.

So he just watches as Tommy sets foot within the L'Manberg borders and heads off at a good clip toward the building he's claimed as his house. It's kind of a sad structure; they really do need some better architecture around here. Maybe he should get on that. He's a fairly good builder himself. He might be able to draw up some plans.

For now, though, he turns his face back toward the stars, and tries to feel like there's nothing missing.

Chapter End Notes

Me, a few weeks ago: I like eternal duo a lot, but I think I'll wait until we get some more concrete lore before I write anything for them.

Me, now: ... So that was a goddamn lie.

Turns out that my love for them outweighs the fact that we still have no clear idea of what their canon relationship is/was. My plan is to stick to the canon for the timeline up until the Red Banquet, so I'll adjust plans for them based on future lore we get if I need to. But for now, my current plan is to proceed with the theory that Eret is some kind of immortal, and they and Foolish were/are best friends, not that Foolish is misremembering or mistaking them for Herobrine or anything like that.

Again, that might change depending on what canon turns out to be. But that's what I'm going with for now. Eternal duo enjoyers, please enjoy the shiny new subplot, and everybody, I look forward to hearing what you make of the hints I dropped in Eret's dream!

Thank you for all the lovely comments and kudos you've left me so far, I appreciate all of you so much! My tumblr is [here](#) if you'd like to stop by!

Next up, Chapter Five: In which Niki receives a letter—and an invitation—from an old friend. She's looking forward to seeing what this new nation of his is all about.

Niki

Chapter Notes

No additional content warnings for once, I think! That has to be a first for me.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

She has no idea what to expect from this server. It makes her a bit nervous, if she's being entirely honest. Dream is a man with a reputation stretching between worlds, and when the letter from Wilbur first arrived, she didn't know what to think. But she does find it easy to believe that Wilbur would take one look at a man with a position of authority and decide to cause trouble. Founding an entire country is above and beyond, even for him, but picturing it comes naturally to her. For as long as she's known him, Wilbur has never been one to do things halfway. That's not always a good thing, but—

You should come to see it, the letter read. It's really something, Niki. Everyone's worked so hard, and I'd love to show it to you.

So here she is, letter folded neatly in her breast pocket as she wanders down the wooden paths that seem to function as the server's main thoroughfares. There's been no one to greet her just yet, even though she's certain her entry pinged on everyone's communicators, if they were looking. But perhaps that's for the better; the letter told her that Dream wouldn't harry her, but that doesn't mean she's particularly eager for a meeting.

And it's simple enough to find the nation. L'Manberg. Just a little further down the path, and there it is, just like Wilbur described to her, blackstone walls raised around it and tipped with yellow. She can see over the top from this vantage point, can pick out a few structures, a flicker of fire, and perhaps a few people moving about, though from this distance, they look more like ants. There is also a tower under construction outside of the walls, already tall but still uneven, clearly not yet finished.

She grins and picks up the pace. The entrance stands wide open, and by the time she makes it there, she's all but jogging, and then, coming to meet her—

"Niki!" Wilbur calls, a wide, beaming smile on his face, and she laughs, barreling into him for a hug.

"Wilbur!" she says in return. "It's so good to see you!"

"It's so good to see *you*!" Wilbur exclaims. He returns her embrace eagerly, though he steps back after only a moment, resting both of his hands on her shoulders. "I'm so glad you came, Niki, I've got so much to show you. We're really doing something special here."

"I can see that," she says. "I could see the walls from far off. They're very impressive."

“Oh, I know,” Wilbur says, and his eyes shine. With pride, with joy. “They’re a symbol of our freedom, of our refusal to bend under tyranny. But that’s not even the half of it. We’ve done so much here. Please, let me show you around?”

He’s already taking her by the arm, so it’s clear that it’s not really a question. Or rather, that he’s presumed her answer. But in this case, he’s presumed correctly, and he’s obviously so excited to show her this place, this place that he’s worked so hard to create, so she lets him take her on a tour. He points out some of the structures that they have—“Much better than they were before, Niki, though we’ve got plans for plenty of others.”—and takes her around the walls, and then to the stage—“We’ll have public events and such here!”—and then outside of the walls, to the tower, where he introduces her to Eret, a lovely-seeming person who’s evidently responsible for much of the construction work here. She’s certain that she’ll get along with them wonderfully. And then, back inside the walls—

“I saved the best for last,” he says, and leads her to a structure that he skipped over, a van topped with what appears to be a shape like a—hot dog? A hot dog on fire? A flaming hot dog?

“Is it a hot dog van?” she can’t help but ask.

Wilbur laughs. “Not quite,” he says, “though it does look that way, doesn’t it? It’s the camarvan, Niki, the camarvan. It’s where all of this started.” He takes her up the stairs and inside, and the interior isn’t quite what she was expecting, judging from the outside. It’s a bit grimy, a bit smoky, though nothing too difficult to breathe through. And it’s full of brewing stands, some of which are actively at work. There’s a door toward the rear, too, apparently leading to a back room of some kind, and she thinks she can make out somebody’s shadow on the wall, bobbing in the haze.

“I will fully admit,” Wilbur says, in a conspiratorial tone, “that this nation started out as an effort to get a monopoly on potions here on the SMP. A drug van, if you will. We didn’t set out to start a country, but when Dream threatened us, well. We really had no choice but to declare independence, not if we wanted to stand up for our ideals.”

A drug van. Her lips twitch up into a smile.

“And what ideals are those?” she asks.

“Freedom, of course!” he replies. “Justice! The fight against tyranny! And also a good bit of sticking it to the man. The man, in this case, being Dream.”

He gestures as he speaks, hands tracing adamant patterns in the air, and she nods along, keeping half an eye on the back room. The shadow stills, and before too long, a face pokes around into the doorway. One that she recognizes, blue eyes wide and blond hair messy, and this face is followed by another, one that she doesn’t recognize.

“Holy shit!” Tommy says, and Wilbur jerks, head turning. “You didn’t say that Niki was coming today!”

She doesn't know Tommy very well. She's only had the chance to meet him a few times, this kid that Wilbur all but adopted as his younger brother. She knows that he is brash, that he is loud, that he has a way of bringing all eyes to him that is entirely different from Wilbur's brand of smooth charisma, that once he decides he wants someone's attention, he is as persistent as a gnat that's found an ear to buzz around. Though perhaps that's not the most flattering of comparisons. There is some truth to it, though; Tommy, from what she can tell, often doesn't seem to care how he leaves an impression, only that he does.

Really, she hasn't seen enough of him to judge. But he does seem like a good kid, and in any case, he looks at Wilbur like he hung the moon. Which Niki understands very well; it's easy to be caught up in Wilbur's orbit.

"I didn't know when she'd get here," Wilbur says with a laugh. "Here, come out, both of you. Niki, you've met Tommy before."

Tommy grins at her, and she can't help but grin back. He wears the same uniform that Wilbur does, an antiquated long blue coat and a tricorne hat, and it fits him well. He seems to be at ease in it, in an outfit clearly styled for a soldier. He's only fifteen, she knows, but in this moment, she almost mistakes him for older.

"This is Fundy," Wilbur continues, walking over to the boys and putting his hand on the other's shoulder, the one that she's never met. His uniform is different, pastel-colored, and compared to Wilbur and Tommy's, not very well-made. "He's my son." He smiles. "My little champion."

Something about that timeline has to be off—Wilbur is in his mid-twenties, and this boy looks to be about Tommy's age, perhaps even a little older. So there's something strange about that, but perhaps he's adopted; Wilbur has a habit of adopting things, bringing people close. Or perhaps there's something else at work. Either way, it seems rude to press at this second, so she smiles in greeting, noting the way that the boy's ears are twitching—fox ears. A hybrid, or perhaps a shapeshifter? That might explain the incongruities.

"It's nice to meet you, Fundy," she says.

"Nice to meet you too," Fundy says. His voice is resigned, perhaps a bit sullen, and she gets the impression that there's definitely something going on that she's not privy to. Whatever it is, though, Wilbur seems unaffected, as he keeps his hand on Fundy's shoulder, still smiling.

"Fundy was the first citizen of L'Manberg," he says. "He was born right here, inside the walls. A bit before they were constructed, of course, but it still counts."

"Yeah, yeah, we've all heard the story," Tommy jumps in, and she doesn't think she mistakes the look of relief that flashes across Fundy's face as Wilbur turns his attention elsewhere. She fidgets, shifting her weight between her feet.

"Well, Niki hasn't—" Wil starts, but Fundy cuts in.

"And it was great to meet her," Fundy says, looking between everyone. "Great to meet you! But I've actually got something to do elsewhere, so I'm just going to go and do that. Right

now, actually. So, I'll catch you later!" He ducks out from under Wilbur's grasp, heading for the door. "You coming, Tommy?"

"Be there in a second," Tommy says. "I'll just tidy up in there and meet you in a bit, yeah?"

Fundy nods, and then he's out the door. Wilbur stares after him fondly, and Tommy takes the opportunity to grin at her again—and is it just her, or does that smile seem strained, now?—and he ducks back into the room that he came out of. A second later, there is a clattering sound, glass clinking together repeatedly.

"It's all for him, really," Wilbur says, voice soft. "The walls, this country, all of it. Him and everyone, but—it's all so they can be safe and free. That's all I want."

"It's a good goal," she says, and his attention finally turns back to her. "It looks to me like you've made a great start."

"I'm glad you think so," he says, and leans against one of the counters, between two of the brewing stands. "This means a lot to me. This nation, it's like—a second child, sort of. I've got to give everything I can to make it as good as it can be. I really do mean it when I say that it stands for something. Something important." He pauses, tilting his head. "I am thinking about holding an election, though. Just a little something to consolidate power, nothing big. But I need the authority to guide L'Manberg to its future. Because I'll tell you, Niki, that future is looking bright."

She tilts her head, too, mirroring him. "Would there even be anyone to run against you?" she asks. Consolidating power. That doesn't sound like the sort of thing that an election would help very much with.

He chuckles. "Not that I can think of. That's sort of the beauty of it," he says, and then, suddenly, Tommy emerges from the room again. He's got a couple of potions cradled under his arm, shimmering with a pink glow.

"Wilbur," he says, and Niki blinks, because his tone is a far cry from a few moments ago, is low and serious in a way she's not certain she's ever heard from the boy. "If you're serious about the election thing, you've got to be careful with it."

It's an odd response to an offhand comment, and obviously, Wilbur agrees, as he arches a brow, regarding Tommy with a bit of confusion. "What are you on about now?" he asks, gently exasperated.

"It's easy for things like that to go wrong," Tommy states. "It might not—it might not go how you're expecting it to go, you know? So, I think you should open it up so that anyone can run, so that way, when you win, nobody doubts the results and all. But—but Wilbur, here's the thing, you can't—I need you to promise me that you won't invite Schlatt to the server, alright? Don't have him come and endorse you, don't even let him step foot in L'Manberg. Don't have him come here, okay?"

It's not a name she recognizes. But Wilbur seems to, because he wrinkles his nose.

“Why the hell would I have Schlatt come here?” he says. “Dream banned him anyway, don’t you remember?”

“I know, I know, just, just don’t, okay?” Tommy takes another step closer. His shoulders are tense. “Wilbur, I’m serious about this.”

“Alright, I won’t, I promise,” Wil says, and immediately, Tommy relaxes. There is still a look in his eyes, though, a look of wariness, and the sample size she’s drawing from is small but she thinks it’s still safe to say that she’s never seen him direct that expression at Wilbur before. “Tommy, why—”

“I’m going to go catch up with Fundy now,” Tommy says. “See you later, Wilbur. And Niki, you too. It’s—really good to see you, Niki. I’m glad you’re here.”

The earnestness in his voice catches her off guard. He sounds completely genuine, genuine in a way that she doesn’t really expect from someone like TommyInnit. Because Tommy is loud and Tommy is brash, but she has never known him to be so open. But then again, she doesn’t know him that well. She needs to keep reminding herself of that, needs to keep reminding herself that everyone has depths to them, no matter how uncomplicated they might seem on the surface. She deals with people making snap judgments about her too often to do the same to someone else.

“I’m glad to be here, too,” she says, and then, Tommy is gone, the door to the caravan swinging shut behind him. She can already hear him calling out for Fundy, and someone named Tubbo, his volume cranked back up to an eleven, like the previous minute or so never happened at all.

Wilbur sighs suddenly, pinching the bridge of his nose. He seems to sag a bit, his perfect posture deflating into something more casual, more—defeated doesn’t quite seem to be the right word, but weary, perhaps.

“He keeps *doing* this, Niki,” he all but moans. “He keeps saying things that don’t make any sense as if they’re the most important things in the universe.”

“Do you think he’s okay?” she asks, already struggling to find something to say that will help. But the problem is, she just doesn’t *know* Tommy all that well. She’d like that to change, especially if she decides that she’s here to stay. But right now, she doesn’t know enough to help, and she doesn’t like that.

“I think so,” Wil says. “I hope so. I wanted to tell you while he was still here—he gets all embarrassed whenever I bring it up, it’s hilarious, but Tommy’s the reason that we have our freedom at all. He traded a couple of his most valued possessions to Dream in exchange for L’Manberg’s autonomy. It was a real sacrifice play. I’m very proud of him. But he hasn’t been quite the same since then.” He sighs again. “I’m worried that he’s more hurt by it than he’s been letting on. I’m trying to be there for him, but it’s been—difficult, these past few weeks.” He smiles slightly, meeting her eyes. “Turns out that running a country is a lot of work. Who knew, right?”

“As long as you’re trying your best, I’m sure he appreciates that,” she says. “And I’m sure he’s got other friends as well that he can turn to, right?”

“He does,” Wil says, frustration leaking into his tone, “he does, I know he does, but—I’m supposed to be looking after him, right? We’re like family. Like brothers, pretty much. And the older brother is supposed to look out for the younger. That’s the job.” He leans back further, crossing one leg over the other, and Niki is struck, suddenly, with the idea that he looks very, very tired. There are bags under his eyes that she didn’t notice right away, but now that she’s seen them, she can’t unsee them. “But he’s being weird about it—and do you know, we’ve actually got a few new citizens because of him. There’s this guy, Quackity, and I wasn’t going to let him join, but Tommy kept at me until I gave in. And then just the other day, I went to a meeting, and when I get back, it turns out that he’s snuck in another guy right under my nose. Jack Manifold. Gave him a uniform and everything. And what am I supposed to do, say no?”

Throughout, his voice becomes more and more petulant, and she pushes down the urge to laugh.

“It just sounds to me like he’s making new friends,” she says, and once again, Wilbur sighs, this time much more dramatically.

“I suppose,” he says, sounding very put upon. “I wish he’d just come to me, though.”

“I’m sure he will in time,” she says. “I don’t know him that well yet, but from what I’ve seen, he thinks the world of you. I’m sure he’ll come talk to you when he’s ready.”

Thankfully, Wilbur perks up a bit at this.

“Thanks, Niki,” he says. “You’re probably right.” He shakes his head ruefully, and then smiles. “He beat me to the punch, but I am also very glad you’re here.”

“I’m glad to be here,” she repeats. “Really, I’m glad you sent me that letter.” And then, because she can’t resist, and because his posture still seems to scream tiredness, she asks, “Are you holding up alright? With all of this? I know you said it was a lot of work.”

For a fleeting moment, a fraction of a second, his eyes widen marginally, and the expression passes so quickly that in the murk of the room, she can’t even be sure that she saw it at all.

“Just fine,” he says brightly. “It’s all worth it. L’Manberg is going to be the pinnacle of freedom and prosperity of the Dream SMP. Which actually reminds me, I have a meeting that I need to be getting to. Dream’s been more generous than I expected with border agreements, but we still don’t have everything ironed out as far as trade goes. So I’m afraid that I’m going to have to leave you.”

“Of course, I understand,” she says, and squashes the little voices that starts to murmur disappointedly. She knew from the beginning, of course, that Wilbur would likely be very busy. Still, she supposes that she just hoped she would have more of an opportunity to catch up with an old friend.

Wilbur holds the door open for her as they exit the camarvan, and then one last smile and he's striding off toward one of the far buildings, one that looks like it might conceivably be a good place for an office. She watches him go, his back straight and strides purposeful. And then, she looks around. There's still plenty of things to do, after all, and plenty of people she hasn't met. So she decides to do a bit of exploring on her own.

But it's not even ten minutes before she runs into Fundy again. He's crouched over a pool of water, staring at the fish, though he doesn't seem to have a rod or anything of that sort. She hesitates a moment, wondering if he would rather be alone, before deciding that if he tells her so, she'll leave without objection.

"Hello again," she says. "It's Fundy, right?"

He doesn't seem surprised that she's there, even though she made little noise on her approach, and when he looks up at her, she sees the probable reason why; his face is now that of a fox, snout and all. A shapeshifter, then. Behind him, his tail lashes back and forth.

"Oh," he says. "Hi! That's me! And you're Niki, right?"

She nods. "I was hoping to get to get to know some of the people here," she says. "I think I might be staying."

She doesn't know that she's going to say it until she does, but as soon as the words leave her mouth, she realizes that it was her intention all along. She needed to see the country to finalize her decision, but really, there's not much for her where she's living now. A quiet life, some friendly acquaintances, an empty house. Here, there are friends and a cause to believe in, and she wants to be a part of it.

To her bemusement, though, Fundy seems to wilt a little bit.

"Did Wil have to go back to work, then?" he asks, turning his attention back to the pool. His tail swishes again, perhaps in agitation, though she doesn't know enough about fox body language to be sure.

"He said he has a meeting," she says, somewhat hesitantly.

"He says that a lot these days," Fundy mutters. "And when it's not a meeting, it's paperwork. Or construction plans. Or just a vague, general thing that makes him super busy that I don't need to worry about or help him with, so go find something to do, Fundy. But it's fine."

She's stumbled into something that she's not equipped to be in the middle of, she thinks.

"It does seem like he's really busy," she tries. Maybe Fundy just needs to get this off his chest. In that case, a listening ear is something she can provide.

"I know he's really busy," Fundy answers. "I just wish he'd let me *do* something. He keeps treating me like I'm some little kid. I'm not a little kid. I know I grew up quick, or whatever, but I'm not a kid. I fought in the revolution. I even made my own uniform!"

That explains—several things. Why the uniform looks so different, so haphazard. And also why Wilbur has a son who's nearly fully grown, if he aged on a timeline more akin to that of the creature he shifts into.

“Well then, maybe you could help me make one, too,” she says. “I might want to have one of my own, if everyone else is wearing them.” She pauses. “Do you think you could show me around a little more? Wilbur gave me a tour, but I'd like to know if he left anything out. I'm sure he showed me everything he thought was important, but that might not be everything.” She shrugs, an exasperated, what-can-you-do sort of gesture, because while she's sure that Wilbur did, indeed show her everything that he thought was important, Wilbur can be prone to tunnel vision when he has a grand plan in mind.

And even if he truly did show her everything, there's no harm in seeing it again.

Fundy perks up, ears standing up straight. “Yeah, that sounds like Wil,” he says. “I could do that! I've been around from the start, so I know all the best places.” He stands, tail moving back and forth rapidly, and that, she is willing to bet, is excitement. She falls into step with him as he starts off, and that seems to be all the invitation he needs to talk, about everything and anything, and there's just as much about the history of what he's showing her as there are personal anecdotes, everything from what he had for breakfast this morning to plans for a prank he wants to play on Tommy. It's endearing, and she finds herself very engaged in the way his words tumble out.

“What do you like to do, where you're from?” he asks her at one point.

“I like to bake a lot,” she answers. “Maybe I'll start a bakery here.”

“That would be awesome,” he says. “We don't have any bakeries. Would you need any help with getting it started?”

And she smiles. “I think I would like that,” she tells him.

It sounds very nice. A nice little bakery, food and sweets for everyone, in a country that she can tell has already become near and dear to her heart somewhere between Wilbur meeting her at the doors and showing her around and now this, his son, showing off his home with obvious joy and pride, just as much enthusiasm as Wilbur showed her.

She thinks she's going to like it here very much. She thinks she already does.

Chapter End Notes

Angst? What do you mean, angst? I'm sure everything is just fine, and nobody is hiding any issues from anyone else. (/s /lh)

As always, thank you all so much for your response to this fic! I have a tendency to answer comments kind of late, but I promise that I read them right away, and they truly

bring me so much joy! So really, thank you thank you thank you, and [my tumblr is here](#) if you'd like to stop by!

Next up, Chapter Six: In which Karl is asked for a favor, and he does his best to accommodate. Even if the whole thing doesn't seem to make any sense. Like, at all.

Karl

Chapter Notes

This one's short and sweet and potentially a little bit fillerish. It's also different from what I think a lot of you might be expecting, so I'm curious to see how you guys react.

Chapter content warnings for swearing and mentioned vomit.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

This server is kind of weird. He's only been here a few days, but he can already tell that much.

He likes it, of course. He wouldn't stick around if he didn't. He does like it, and there's a few old friends here already—Sapnap, just to name one—and a few people that he thinks he's going to become friends with very, very quickly. He's even already working on building a pizza place, which is pretty neat. A lot of the land around here seems to be kind of a free-for-all. Except for the stuff in—what was it, L'Manberg? Which he has not been allowed to join, but it's no real skin off his back. Other than that, though, there aren't a whole lot of rules here. No stealing, no grieving, no going to the End. He's cool with those.

But still. The place is kind of weird. He can't describe it any way more specific than a vibe. A general, handwavey type of weirdness. Maybe it's the people. A lot of the people he's met have been a little weird. A good kind of weird, maybe, but still weird. Like that Wilbur guy, the president of L'Manberg. Very intense. A good talker, and fairly friendly, even if he didn't let him join his country, but very intense. Or like Eret, who speaks with an odd kind of gravitas, phrasing things just so slightly more formal than the usual. Or like that guy who was pretty much naked. Quackity, he thinks. He seems like an interesting guy to get to know.

And then there's this kid. TommyInnit.

"I need a favor," Tommy says, apropos of absolutely nothing.

Karl's just messing around with the pizza place for the moment. They've only got the foundations built so far, but Eret and Punz have both offered their help, and he's looking forward to getting the place off the ground. Every server ought to have a pizza place, because pizza is the superior food choice. But he wasn't expecting Tommy to come over to him, much less start off the conversation like that, and he's feeling a little bit caught off guard.

What he knows about the kid doesn't amount to all that much. From what he's gathered, he's loud, a little irritating, and a bit of a con artist. Not too weird on the exterior, but this? Right now? Is definitely a little weird, if only because the guy's just marched up to him and asked him for a favor despite the fact that he's only known him for about three days, tops. Which, he's happy to see what he can do. The kid seems fine enough. But it's weird that he's asking

him, specifically, for something, right? Instead of one of his friends? Of which he seems to have many?

“Um, that probably depends on what it is, but sure, I guess,” he says.

Tommy nods. He’s staring at him with some of that same intensity that Wilbur hit him with when they met. Which he supposes makes sense if they’re brothers, like he’s heard, even though Tommy didn’t present any of this attitude when they first talked. But then, first impressions aren’t always accurate.

“It shouldn’t be a big deal, I don’t think,” Tommy says. “I just need you to ask someone something for me. Simple, yeah?”

Again, he wonders why Tommy is coming to *him* with this. But he shrugs, leaning against the partial wall he’s gotten built. “It still depends on who and what, but I can do that. What do you want me to ask?”

Tommy stands straighter. “You know BadBoyHalo and Skeppy, yeah?” he asks, and Karl—still can’t see where he’s going with this.

“I know Bad and Skeppy,” he confirms, raising his eyebrows. Tommy takes that as a cue to continue.

“I need you to persuade them not to build somewhere,” he says. “Can you do that?”

“Probably,” he says. He’s hedging a little, but he thinks he’s justified. Tommy seems to be dancing around something here, and he’s not sure he likes that. “What exactly do you want me to say?”

“There’s a little bit of land over near” —Tommy scrunches his nose— “near Punz’s, I think—or, wait, is that—I don’t know if he’s—actually, it might be closer to Fundy’s? I can’t remember if—” He breaks off for a second, narrowing his eyes, looking away. But then, he looks back. “Nevermind. It’s not in L’Manberg. There’s a few little lakes and shit. Past where Purpled’s UFO is. You know where I’m talking about?”

“Um.” He tries to picture the area and comes up with a hazy approximation. “Maybe?”

“Alright, fine. Look, I’ll show you on a map if I have to. But the point is, I need you to talk to Bad and Skeppy, and I need you to get them to promise that they won’t build in that area. No building, no digging, no nothing. Skeppy’s gonna want to build a house to the north, and that—that’s fine. They can build wherever else they like, but that spot up there, that’s a no-go, alright? No one can dig around there, but mostly them.”

This is definitely weird.

“Can I ask why?” he says. “You’re not out to get them, are you? Or is L’Manberg planning to expand up there or something?”

“What?” Tommy says. “What the fuck are you on about? No, I’m not—I’m not out to get them. That’s fucking stupid.”

He holds up his hands. “Well, I had to be sure,” he says. “I’ve only been here a few days, I don’t know who likes who around here.” He pauses. “So, the expansion—”

Not that he really cares what L’Manberg does or where they spread the borders of their land. He may not be allowed to join them, but he supposes he’s not officially with the Greater SMP either. He hasn’t been here nearly long enough to commit himself to a side, especially when there doesn’t appear to be any kind of pressing conflict going on anymore. But if he’s going to argue Tommy’s case to some of his friends—and why Tommy has picked him for this task, he still has no idea—then he’d like to know exactly what he’s arguing for, and why.

But Tommy shakes his head. “No expansion,” he says. “Nothing like that. It’s just—look, man, it’s just bad land. Terrible land. It’s got—it’s got radiation, it has. So no one should go there, literally ever.” He waves his hands as he speaks, gesticulating emphatically.

Karl’s not sure he believes a word of this. But at the same time, he seems so earnest about it, or at least, about the part where it’s bad land, that it could hurt people. Maybe not the radiation bit.

“That sounds really dangerous,” he says, and watches for what the reaction will be, trying to get a feel for what exactly the catch is, here. “Shouldn’t we tell more people about this?”

Tommy jerks, and his eyes go wide. “No!” he says, definitely with far more force than should be necessary for a fairly innocent question. But it’s not really the force of someone caught in a lie and trying to cover his tracks. Nothing like that—he just sort of seems scared. “No, definitely not. It’s not—it’s not dangerous to walk on or anything. Just if you dig down. The—the radiation’s coming from under the ground. So as long as no one digs, or builds their home right there, it should be alright, yeah? Just, just tell them not to go poking around there, man.”

“Alright, alright,” he says, and raises his hands again, placating. “Sure, I can tell them. I honestly don’t know if they were planning to go up there in the first place. Uh, can I ask why them specifically?”

“No,” Tommy says, and does not elaborate at all, despite the obvious invitation to do so. The expectation, even. Which feels a little weird in and of itself, considering that from what he can tell, Tommy does enjoy talking. But nothing else is forthcoming, so he shifts his feet, clearing his throat.

“Okay then,” he says. “Okay. Look, I can’t guarantee anything, but I’ll try my best. I’ll even go with a different story than the radiation, if you want. I mean, Skeppy might want to check something like that out, you know? But as long as this isn’t some sort of plot to hurt them, I’m cool with it.”

“There’s no story,” Tommy mutters, and kicks his shoe against the ground. “S radiation.” He doesn’t even look like he believes himself, at this point, but he does look a little pathetic, and he’s got some big, sad cow eyes going on. Karl’s not sure whether they’re natural or just him putting on an act. But he figures it couldn’t hurt to throw the kid a bone, whatever he’s trying to accomplish with this. And even besides, maybe it would be beneficial to be in the guy’s

good graces. He already has friends here, but a few more couldn't hurt, since this server is so incredibly weird.

Weirdness can be dangerous, sometimes. He hasn't decided yet whether this server is or not. Dangerous, that is.

"Whatever you say," he agrees, and Tommy's face melts into open relief when he doesn't press further. There's still something about this he wants to know, though, so he presses forward. "Um, but if you don't mind my asking, why are you getting me to do this? Why not someone like Sapnap?"

He thinks it's a good question. Sapnap is, after all, their literal son. So even though he knows them pretty well, considers them friends, if anyone's going to convince them to do something, it's Sapnap.

But Tommy just shakes his head, narrowing his eyes like it's the stupidest thing he's ever heard.

"Karl, pal, I know you're new on this server," he says, "but us over there in L'Manberg just fought a whole war against Dream and his groupies. Groupies that just so happen to include a certain pet-killing, fire-starting arsehole. No offense," he adds belatedly, to which Karl just stares. "So you know, if I were to go to Sapnap myself, or even straight to Bad and Skeppy, they'd assume, and they'd be incorrect, mind you, but they'd assume that I have some sort of scheme in mind. A little plot, if you will. And I don't. I've told you that, and I'm being honest with you. But if they don't believe me, then that kind of defeats the whole purpose of warning them off, now, doesn't it? So I thought to myself, well, maybe my buddy Karl could succeed where I wouldn't be able to."

He finds his lips twitching into a smile. The kid's definitely a con artist in the making.

"Okay, you've sold me," he says. "I'll do my best to keep them away." He pauses. "I've got a condition, though."

Tommy goes still. "Yeah?" he asks, and it's back to the tension, back to the intensity, and Karl almost regrets it. It's strange, how quickly the kid goes back and forth between appearing to be exactly what he is on the surface—a kid—and seeming far, far older than that. "What's that?"

"When you're finished with whatever you're working on up there, I wanna see it," he says, sticking his hands in his pockets.

It's the only explanation that makes sense. Tommy has some sort of secret project, one that he doesn't want anyone else to stumble upon. Sounds like it could be a good time.

Tommy blinks. For a long moment, he is silent. And then his mouth twists into a grin, one that drags like a sharp line across his face and doesn't really look like a smile at all.

"Sure," he says. "The whole server might know by then, I don't know. But yeah, when I'm done, you can come see, Karl."

For some reason, the kid sounds like he's pronouncing a death sentence. Which Karl is not going to examine too closely.

"Cool," he says, and isn't sure where else to go with this. "Uh, do you wanna hang out for a little while? Or—?" He trails off. The invitation is honest; he certainly wouldn't mind spending time with him. But the vibes continue to be weird, and honestly, he would be surprised if Tommy took him up on it. He's fidgeting like he's got places to be.

And sure enough, Tommy shakes his head again.

"Nah," he says. "Got places to go, women to see. You know how it is. See you around, Karl."

And he turns to go. Karl decides to watch him until he's out of sight, just in case, which makes it a little awkward when Tommy stops after about three paces.

"Actually," he says, "do you mind if I ask you something else?"

"Go for it," he replies.

Tommy hesitates. His hands clench and unclench, and his mouth opens and closes a couple of times. Struggling with himself, with whatever he's about to say, and Karl waits. Patiently, he thinks, even though patience is not one of his strong suits. If ever there was a time to apply a bit of patience, it's probably now; he has the sneaking suspicion that if he says anything to prompt him, Tommy will simply turn and leave without saying anything else at all.

"How do you do it?" Tommy asks, and his voice is different. Flatter, more tired. Does this kid sleep? "The whole—" He makes a broad gesture, which doesn't clarify anything at all.

"The whole—?" he says, once it becomes obvious that Tommy is actually expecting some kind of answer to that.

Tommy makes a frustrated sound. "I mean, I don't wanna spell it out," he says, even though Karl is of the opinion that is what this situation needs, actually. "But the whole, the whole—look, I know, alright? We had—we found one of your books." His voice cracks, and Karl feels increasingly out of his depth here. It's almost like they're having two entirely different conversations, because he has absolutely no clue what's going on now. "So I know. And I get it if you—if you don't want to talk about it. But it's so—it's just so fucking much, and I feel like there's too much to keep straight, and there's so much to do to make things right but half the time I've got no idea what my next move needs to be, and it's—it's just *hard*, man. So how do you—how do you keep it all together? I've tried writing some shit down, but it's not helping all that much."

"Uh," he says. He doesn't know what to do with that. This feels like an incredibly personal question, and he's not even sure what the question is, he thinks. Is he even the one the kid wants to ask? Is he confused? Because Karl sure feels confused, so that would make two of them. "Huh?"

He tries to think of what book Tommy could be referencing and comes up empty. He likes to write things down, admittedly, places he's been and people he's met and stories he's learned

and collected, but he doesn't have anything on him at the moment. He'd been planning to start afresh here. Maybe build a little library or something. Nothing too fancy.

"You *know*," Tommy says, insistent, and he shakes his head.

"I really don't," he says. "I'm—look, I'm really sorry, but maybe you've got me mixed up with somebody. I've only been here a few days, and I haven't really gotten to write anything down yet. Sorry, man, I don't think I can help you."

"But you—" Tommy starts, and then stops. He takes a few steps closer, and Karl has to resist the sudden urge to match him step for step, to move backward. There is a light in this kid's eyes that he can't place, one that's almost like—something. Something that shouldn't be, and he doesn't have the words to describe it in any other way than that. But then, Tommy leans in, scanning his face, and makes a startled sound. "Oh, shit. You've got no fucking clue what I'm talking about."

"I don't," he agrees, and wonders why that makes Tommy look like he wants to vomit. The light is gone, and he finds himself relaxing marginally.

"Oh fuck," Tommy says, and steps back again, running his hand through his hair. His eyes are wide. "Ohhhh fuck. Fuck, shit, I—I'm too early." He says the last in a whisper, as if to himself, and then repeats it: "I'm too *early*." And Karl watches in horrified fascination as the kid visibly gathers himself, taking all of his emotions and stuffing them away somewhere in what is the most impressive display of repression he's ever seen from someone under the age of eighteen.

"Are you—good?" he asks, because he's confused, but he's not a monster. Tommy's obviously dealing with something here, and maybe that something is far out of his wheelhouse, but if he's equipped to help, he will.

But Tommy backs up another few steps, pasting on a smile that shakes and wavers.

"No, no, I'm good," he says. "Just, just forget about all of that, yeah? You're right, I got you mixed up with someone. Happens all the time, since I'm so incredibly popular. So I'll just—I'm just going to go, now. Sorry to bother you, Karl." And then, he waves, a sad, pathetic motion, and stalks off, his steps quick and rushed. It's a retreat. Karl would go so far as to say that he's fleeing.

"You're not a bother," he says, but the kid's already out of earshot. So he goes with his original plan and stares after him until the splash of red and white is nothing more than a dot in the distance.

He looks back to the foundation of his building. His first mark on the server. For a second, he feels so discomfited that he considers calling it a day and going home. But then, he shrugs it off. In the end, it's a whole lot of not-his-business.

Though he hopes that whatever Tommy's grappling with, he manages to get through it. He seems like a good kid.

Chapter End Notes

Tommy's trying his best, and that's all I'll say about that for fear of accidentally revealing more than I want to at this point.

I ended up being vaguely dissatisfied with this chapter, but maybe that's because I don't know c!Karl all that well lmao. In any case, one of the main points here was to establish that Karl isn't going to be nearly as helpful to Tommy as I think some of you were hoping. I'm running with the idea that his time travel ability started around the same time that TftSMP did, so like... not yet. Currently, Karl is simply A Guy, and not one that's going to play a super important role in this fic, unfortunately. Very sorry if you were hoping for more, though he probably will at least show up again.

Questions? Comments? Concerns? Screaming? [I'm on tumblr!](#) And thank you all so much for the comments and kudos, I appreciate all of them so very much!

Next up, Chapter Seven: In which Eret's not the only one who's been having strange dreams, and on a different server entirely, someone scribbles away in a journal, trying to make sense of the weirdest memory issue he's had yet.

Ranboo

Chapter Notes

Didn't get around to answering comments for the last chapter, mostly because it's been like. Almost a whole month, oops. But still, thank you so much to those who left them, it really makes my day to read them <3

Content warnings this chapter for memory issues, mild unreality, mentioned blood, and implied (past) character death.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Page 1

I'm not really sure how to start this.

One of the most important things to know is probably that this is a different journal from the other one. So just in case you forget: this isn't your memory book. This is for something different. But it's still really important that you keep track of this one. Maybe not as important as the memory book? But I'm not really sure.

So don't lose it.

Now's the part where I'd say exactly what it's for, except I don't really know yet. I don't know anything. You'd think that wasn't anything new for me, but this is... different. I keep putting that it's different without explaining why. Words are just not my friends.

I think I'm wasting ink.

This is a dream journal, I guess? I don't know how else to put it. Because I've been having some really, really weird dreams for the past few weeks, and it's gotten to the point where I just. Feel like I need to be keeping track of them? Because it's kind of weird that I'm having so many dreams at all considering what usually happens when I fall asleep (check the memory book? for that? if you need to?), so I just don't know. I don't know anything. Which is nothing new, but still. I feel kind of bad that I bought a whole book and a whole new pen just to write down how much I don't know stuff, but it's okay. I've been winning more recently so I had enough money.

The thing about the dreams is that they're really vivid. Almost like they feel real. The details always go fuzzy after a while, so I don't actually have anything specific to write down here yet, but I know they're weird. There's just something about them.

So, new book. Dream journal.

Next time you have one of them, remember to write it down here.

Page 2

Okay so I forgot I bought this for like a week but I remember now. And I just woke up and I had one of those really weird dreams, so here's what it was about:

- There were some people with me. I don't remember what their faces looked like. I think they were all shorter than me, but that doesn't really narrow it down. There were... three? Maybe? I think there were three of them. And I felt like I knew them. Dream-me knew them, I mean. I have no idea who they were.*
- They were talking about something, and I was talking too, like I knew what they were talking about, even though I definitely didn't. That's something weird about all these dreams—I'm pretty sure that while I'm in them, it always feels? Right, I guess? Even though I definitely don't know what's going on literally ever?? But anyway they were talking about something, and I don't really remember what but they seemed upset. I think I was upset too. I felt kind of upset.*
- They had swords. Really fancy ones.*
- It was cold??? But like really, really cold. Colder than I think I've ever been? Or at least colder than I remember ever being, so it's kind of weird that my brain could make up something that cold.*

There's not much else to write because I don't remember what the conversation was about. It just felt like there was something bad happening. But I don't feel like the people were bad. The people felt good, actually. Safe?

Oh, and one of them hugged me at the end. Which was weird because I don't usually like to be hugged or touched by people, especially people who I don't know, but in the dream I was fine with it. I even liked it. It felt... safe's a good word to use. It felt warm and safe and I didn't feel so scared anymore. It was a really good hug actually. I kind of wish it weren't a dream because if someone hugged me like that I think I wouldn't mind hugging so much.

I think that guy had wings. Or maybe it was a really big, weird blanket. I don't really know. Felt good though.

Page 3

I had another one. All I remember is a name.

Who's Michael?

Page 4

I think tonight was a normal night. I don't remember anything in particular but I woke up feeling really unsettled for some reason. So it was probably just a regular dream, or maybe a nightmare. I was in the same place though, so not sleepwalking I hope.

I can't stop thinking about the name Michael. It feels really important. I wish I knew why.

Page 7

It's been a week of weird little fragments and strange feelings and things I can't remember, but I remembered more when I woke up this morning.

I was running with someone. Two someones? I think there were two. But they were different from the people from before. Or at least I think they were. I still don't remember what they looked like. I think I didn't know what they looked like in the dream either. I don't know if that's because I was dreaming or maybe all of this really is just my brain making up stuff and it just can't invent whole people for me to look at.

I wouldn't be surprised, actually. This whole thing is probably pointless.

But anyway, we were running, and that was pretty much the whole thing. There was a really loud noise too, and it was making my ears hurt. And I remember I felt really scared. Not just for myself, but also for the people I was with. That's one of the things that makes me not so sure that these are normal dreams, because even if my brain was making up hazy not-real people for me to do stuff with, would it be able to make up the feelings that I have for them? Whenever there's someone with me in a dream, they always feel really important to me. I'm usually worried about them.

I still can't remember what they were saying or the sound of their voices. I feel bad about it. Probably worse than I should.

They're just dreams, right?

Page 10

Dream.

Not sure what that was? Note to self, do a better job at including context.

[illegible]

I had another pretty clear one. It was really hot. I think there was a lot of smoke. I was scared again, because there was... someone coming? Maybe?? Or something coming. I'm not sure. But whatever it was, it was bad, and we didn't want it to get there.

There were three people again. I think I didn't like one of them. When I looked at them I felt really, really angry. But that one, the one I didn't like, they were kneeling on the ground, and there was a book in their hands? I know it was a book but I couldn't see what it said. Isn't that supposed to be a thing, not being able to read in dreams? I don't know.

I think that person was reading from the book. I couldn't understand the words, but the air felt weird. Heavy. And then I think there was a fourth person too, and then I think there were people trying to stop the person reading because they were doing something bad? They were going to hurt someone? It got muddled here and I don't know why we were trying to stop them all of a sudden when I think we were fine with it at first, but I guess dreams don't have to make sense.

None of this makes any sense.

But anyway, something happened, I think. Something really, really bad and I don't remember what, because that's when I woke up. But something went wrong. I think the bad thing got there.

I think there might also have been blood. But I'm not sure.

I'm not sure of anything.

Page 16

Wait, what happened on page 13?

I can't read what it says. Did I cross that out?

Page 17

I can't help but wonder if these are dreams at all. I've already got memory problems so who's to say this isn't just some more of that, just in a different form?

But the thing about that is, if these are memories of some kind I've got no idea when they could've happened. ~~And I know my memory's not great, but could I really forget being on a completely different server?~~

No, I could definitely forget being on a different server. I definitely could. I don't even know where I came from originally. But I know I've been on Hypixel for years. I know I've been here, even if I don't really remember a whole lot of particulars, so when did any of this happen?

I don't know if I want these dreams to be memories. Some of them feel really scary.

Page 18

I woke up crying.

I think someone was dead in my dream. Someone I really really cared about.

I'm still crying a little bit. It hurts. I don't want these to be memories. I don't want to have lost someone like that.

Page 21

~~I definitely don't want these to be memories I'm still shaking and I don't I can't~~

Page 22

Okay. I've calmed down. I need to write this. I need to remember later.

I think I hurt someone. Really, really hurt someone.

I'm going to describe this as best I can.

The whole thing felt dim and kind of hazy, but not in the normal dream sort of way. Like there was an actual haze in the air. And everywhere I looked it was all red, like I was wearing tinted glasses or something. I was with other people. Different people from any of the ones before, I think, and I felt different about them too. I wrote down how usually I'm worried about the people I'm with, but it wasn't like that this time.

I think I hated them. I'm not sure. I don't really know what that feels like.

But anyway, we were going somewhere together. There was something like an island, only it was in the sky. Like a big chunk of floating rock. And we were trying to get up there, and then we did and there was someone waiting for us. I can't picture what they looked like except I think they were weirdly blurry? But everyone in these dreams is weirdly blurry. I don't know, this felt like a different kind of blurriness. I think this person was trying to talk to us or stop us or something, but it was really easy to get past them. Almost like we could go straight through them.

And then we were inside. There was a building of some kind. Big and kind of pretty? Maybe? It was hard to see details, because of the haze and blurriness and everything, and it still all looked really red. There was someone else waiting for us inside. I remember this part because it was really weird, because at first this person was like, normal sized. And then they got super big. So many feet tall. Taller than me, and that's weird. That doesn't happen very often.

And then we were all fighting this person. I don't remember this part super well. Somebody got hurt I think, and maybe there was also lightning?? I think I remember lightning. And the fight went on for a while, and then I went somewhere else so I don't know how it ended, whether the big guy won or the people I was with or what.

But so I went down this hallway. And then a bunch of hallways and then I was in a bigger room. This is the important part. There were three people in this room. One of them was sitting with their back facing me, one of them was kind of in the middle, looking my way, and the other one was really little and sitting in the corner.

I don't

I don't know why I did what I did next. I'm not even sure that I wanted to. It was like I was watching myself do it, almost. Like there was something else moving me and I didn't like that at all and I really don't want to think about it more but there it is.

And then I

~~I don't want to write this~~

The whole room lit up. There was some kind of glowing design on the ground. The person with their back to me was on the edge of it, and the person in the middle was. In the middle. Of it. And they saw me. They looked at me and I felt

I don't even know what I felt.

And then it was like the whole world just. Stopped. I don't know how to describe it. And the other person shouted something and then I just

And then I stepped forward, and I grabbed the first person by the hair, and there was a sword in my hand, and I think I

I slit their throat.

The other person was screaming. I don't know what happened to the little one.

And then it all went dark, and I woke up.

I don't know what to do. I don't even want to remember this, even though I guess I should. If it's more than just a dream, but I don't want it to be more than just a dream.

And if this is a memory or something, I don't know what to do.

Should I turn myself in? What would I even say? Hi, I think I murdered someone. No, I'm not sure, but I had this weird dream you see, and it's actually possible that I might have done this because sometimes I do things in my sleep that I don't remember later and my memory is just, incredibly bad in general so it's actually super possible that I killed someone and then forgot about it.

Would anyone even believe that? Should I try?

I don't want to hurt someone.

Page 24

The dreams keep coming, but none of them have been as detailed as that last one.

I still don't know what to do.

I wish someone would tell me what to do.

But I don't think I can tell anyone about this. Who would I even tell?

Can I put myself in prison? Can someone do that? At least I would know for certain that I'm not hurting anyone.

~~Sometimes I think I have blood on my hands and I just want to scrub it off so bad but that's not a good idea for obvious reasons but I just~~

I really need a solution.

He's wandering around one of Hypixel's hubs when he sees the news. Hypixel's pretty good for that: news from other servers. Probably because so many players from so many places converge here. But he's never bothered very much with that kind of stuff. There's not much to bother with, considering that he has no idea where he was before he was here, and he has no idea where he'd go if he ever left. It's not like he knows anybody. Literally. Anywhere. It's kind of sad, if he's being honest.

But for some reason, Ranboo hears the name 'Dream SMP' and stops dead in his tracks.

Which, not his best idea ever, considering that this is a crowded hub, so someone bumps into him pretty much right away, and then they glare at him right in his eyes, and he has to duck his head and apologize because oops, he's inconvenienced someone so now he'd like the earth to swallow him whole, please, and also eye contact. Hm. Not good. He doesn't like that. It makes his chest buzz and his head ache and every bone in his body go all stiff and tense.

So he makes himself start walking again before he can cause any more trouble. He just makes sure he heads in the direction of the news cast. For no particular reason, it's just—that name. It strikes a chord in him, and he'd like to know a little more, that's all.

There's a few people hanging around, obviously with the same idea. They don't pay him any attention, which is nice, because that means he can just stand there and listen without worrying about having to talk to anyone.

The newscaster is talking about an election. Being held on this server, the Dream SMP. He's not sure why something like that would matter here, especially after the newscaster goes on to say that there's only a few dozen players on this server in total. Except then it turns out that people don't *have* to be on this server to vote in this election, which doesn't make any sense to him at all. Something about how influential the server is? So other people get a say in stuff?

He's not going to bother writing that part down, because he wouldn't understand it even if he did.

And then the newscaster starts talking about the people who are running for office in this country on this server. And there's. Pictures. And he's pretty sure that his heart is trying to crawl up his throat and literally outside of his body. Because. Okay. Most of these people, he has no idea who they are. Which is absolutely what he expected.

But then, the news shows the current president. Who is also running. And the current president's vice president. And—he doesn't recognize this Wilbur person.

Somehow, though, he sees TommyInnit, and he almost bursts into tears, which, wow. Strong reaction much? And he tries really hard not to cry if he can help it, which makes this even more weird. It's not even that he recognizes him, because he's pretty sure that he doesn't. Or if he does, he can't place where he knows him from. But he looks at this guy—and he doesn't look like anything special, really, just a guy, a teenager, blond hair and kind of lanky, red and white t-shirt—and feels a whirlwind of emotions in him, rising up, threatening to bubble over, and it's strange and confusing because he doesn't know why.

Just to be sure, he pulls out his memory book and leafs through it. No mention of anyone named TommyInnit, or even just Tommy. He pulls out the dream journal, too, but it's the same. The only name in there is Michael. No Tommy.

There's plenty of other things written in there. Things he doesn't want to think about. Even though trying not to think about them kind of just makes him think about them more, and then he feels terrible, and then—

“Huh,” the guys standing nearest to him says, very suddenly. “How about that.”

He's scared for a second, because he thinks the guy might be talking to him, about him, that he's read some of his writing over his shoulder or something. But no, the guy is looking at the screen, still. His eyebrows are raised. Ranboo focuses on them, because he's found that if he looks at people's eyebrows, it's close enough to eye contact that people won't ask why he's not looking at them, and it's far enough that he's not bothered. Best of both worlds. And it's also probably better to stare there than at the guy's big, curling horns, or the way he's dressed. In a fancy suit—and that's odd. Not the suit part, because Ranboo likes to wear suits himself, when he can get them. Because they're cool and snazzy. Mostly, it's just the fact that it's so well-fitting. Obviously expensive, even to his eyes.

He doubts that this is the sort of person who competes in the tournaments.

And then, the guy turns toward him, and he regrets. So very much, so very intensely. He shouldn't have stared at all.

“The hell are you looking at?” the guy says, and. Um. This is not very good, actually.

“Sorry,” he says, and averts his eyes really, really far away. Back to the screen. “You just. I mean. You talked, and no one else here really is, so I just. Yeah. Sorry.”

The guy laughs, so maybe he's not mad. “Don't sweat it, kid,” he says, but then, instead of leaving him alone, he keeps talking to him. Oh boy. What has he started. “You interested in shit like this?”

What does he say to that? He's not even sure what this is, exactly.

"Kind of?" he ventures. "I guess I just wanted to know what was going on." That's good. Nice and vague.

The guy shakes his head. "You and me both. Never woulda thought Wilbur had something like this in him. Politics was never his shtick. But hey, best of luck to him, right? I'm rooting for him."

Oh! So this guy knows one of the people on the server. The president. Wilbur Whatever-His-Last-Name-Was, He Forgot.

"Do you," he starts, and breaks off after the guy turns back to him. But no, he wants to know. This is a reasonable question to ask, he thinks. "I mean, do you know how somebody might, um. Go about trying to get on this server? If they thought there was someone there they knew?"

The guy laughs again, louder, and he cringes back. "Trying to get on that server?" he says. "Good luck with that. They say Dream's exclusive as hell with who he invites. If you've got someone's private comm code, you might have some luck there, be able to plead your case, but you're shit out of luck otherwise. Unless you wanna try hacking, but I wouldn't recommend that. Shit's too much of a risk, not enough payoff, especially when it's Dream you're dealing with."

"Oh," he says. "Um. Dream. That's the admin?"

"Bastard," the guy says, nodding. "Banned me, the asshole. Not that I care about being on his shitty server, but it's the principle of the thing. You get it, don't you?"

"Sure?" He doesn't. Or, well, maybe.

His brain has gotten a bit stuck on the idea of hacking. Which is not a good idea, of course. Not a good idea at all. Even if he managed to get on, somehow, he'd be kicked off before he could do anything, surely. And if he failed—he's heard stories. Rumors, more than anything. Players who get stuck in the void, locked out of any server at all. Players who mess with their own code by mistake, causing glitches, mutations, splices. Players who are never seen again.

Hacking's a dangerous kind of magic. Not something to be messed with lightly.

"What's your name, kid?" the guy asks, and he jolts.

"Um. Ranboo," he says. "I'm Ranboo."

"Ranboo," the guy repeats. He doesn't pronounce it quite right. "Weird fucking name. Well, good luck with whatever the hell you're doing, I guess. If you do anything illegal, it's nothing that I told you about."

"Of course?" he says, but the guy's already walking away. He's got a confident kind of walk. Ranboo feels uneasy, watching his retreating back vanish into the crowds of the hub.

He looks back at the screen. The news has moved on. He wishes it hadn't; he would've liked to hear it all again so the details were fresher.

Because this—this should go in the memory book. He's not entirely sure why. But it's important, and he doesn't want to forget important things. What he'll do with the information, he'll figure out later.

Hacking. He shouldn't. He definitely shouldn't.

But something about this *Tommy*—

He brings out his memory book and his pen, and he starts to write.

Chapter End Notes

Only good things can come of this, I'm sure.

I'm hoping to update this fic more regularly now that 'careful son' is finally finished (and [here](#), btw, if you haven't read it and think you might enjoy a non-canon compliant c!Wilbur resurrection fic). But on the other hand, I go back to school in person in a few weeks for the first time since the pandemic started, so I'm sure that will affect my fic output. How much, I don't know yet, but consider this advance warning lmao.

[My tumblr is here!](#)

Next up, Chapter Eight: In which Fundy makes it known that he's going to run for president, and altogether, it goes fairly well. On the surface, at least.

Fundy

Chapter Notes

Not much in the way of additional content warnings this chapter, though feel free to let me know if I missed something!

Here comes everybody's favorite fruit-based political party :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The easy part is deciding to run.

It's all a pretty clear-cut process. The rules were stated at the outset, though he's got no idea what was Wilbur's idea and what was Tommy's, considering how much Tommy seems to care about this whole thing. But none of them are unreasonable or anything like that, nothing that he'd find objectionable. He just has to declare his party's intention before election night, not rig the vote, not join his vote with any other parties, and not seek endorsements from people who are banned from the server. And be a citizen of L'Manberg.

There's nothing wrong with any of those, or at least, not that Fundy can see. And—he wants to run. He wants to look all the rest of the players on this server in the eyes and make them see him, respect him, listen to him. For himself, because he is awesome and capable, and not because they think he's an extension of someone else.

So deciding to run is pretty easy. It's not like he'll even be the first; Quackity's already declared his intentions, though he's running solo, and doesn't seem to be taking it too seriously. He considered trying to become his running mate, but Niki, when he explained his idea to her, seemed pretty on board to run with him. Niki's really cool like that, and honestly, he'd rather team with her than with anyone else. So he's running. He's going to do it. He's going to.

The difficult part is going to be telling Wilbur.

So he's not procrastinating. He's definitely not procrastinating. It's just—there's other people to talk to about it, right? Other people to tell? And it's not like it matters what order he goes in. So that's why he's here, at the base of one of those big towers that Eret is building, hoping to find them here. It's getting late, but the sun only set a little while ago, so they're probably still around.

This can be like a practice run. A trial, for telling people about it. And Eret's always listened to him, and they're not even running themselves, he's pretty sure, so this will be good, to ease him into it. Not that this is something that needs easing. But it's good to practice things, even if it's not something that necessarily requires it. He's just being responsible, which is a trait that anyone would value in a president.

The tower's still a work in progress, but it's pretty easy to get to the highest level. He's almost certain that Eret is still here, and he's right about that, but on a second glance, it turns out that Eret is asleep. They're sitting upright, their back to the most completed section of wall, but their head has lolled to the side, their glasses close to slipping from their nose. He can even see their eyes—closed, of course. They're definitely asleep. Definitely a little weird, since it's not even that late, but he has noticed that they've been looking a little tired lately. Probably because they've sort of been responsible for a lot of L'Manberg's development, build-wise.

He should come back later, probably. Except, that can't be comfortable at all, and it's really not that late, and the tower's not finished yet, so the whole place is kind of exposed. Not the safest area to be taking a nap in after dark. Mobs might be able to get in, and then where would Eret be?

And also, he's been psyching himself up this whole time, and if he doesn't tell Eret here and now, he thinks that he might end up waiting until tomorrow to tell anyone at all. Not because he's nervous! It's just—late, and he's spent time getting up here already, so he wants to do what he came here to do. That's it.

So he creeps forward, not too loud but not trying to be too quiet, either, and crouches by Eret's side. As he moves, something glimmers, and he squints, but—no, it's just Eret's jewelry reflecting the torchlight. They've taken to wearing a good bit of gold, lately.

“Hey, Eret?” he says. “Eret? It's your pal Fundy. Maybe wake up?”

Eret doesn't wake up. But their brow has creased, so, encouraged, he continues.

“Not a great place to go to sleep, probably,” he says, and he reaches out to give their shoulder a tap. “I mean, I know you've seemed pretty tired lately, but yikes. Maybe not good. C'mon, wake up.”

Eret still doesn't wake, but they start to breathe quicker, which is probably not because of him at all. Are they having a nightmare? If they're having a nightmare, he should definitely wake them up, because friends don't let friends have nightmares.

“Hey,” he says, and shakes their shoulder more vigorously. “C'mon, man, I wanna tell you something.” He glances at the sky; the tower doesn't have a roof yet. “And it's getting just a little bit late, so you should probably go sleep in your house and not here, and I still need to go by the office so I can tell Wilbur—”

Eret gasps, lurching forward, jamming their sunglasses back over their eyes in the same motion, and Fundy jerks back a bit on instinct. He has no idea why they wear those all the time. Maybe it's a light sensitivity thing. Or maybe they just want to look cool. But now's probably not the time to focus on that, because Eret's breathing is still way too fast, and they were definitely having a nightmare, from that reaction, so he inches forward again.

“Hey, Eret,” he says. “Sorry about that. Are you good?”

For a moment, Eret doesn't reply. And when they do, their voice is—kind of weird. He's not sure how to describe it, except as *off*.

"He failed," they say, between gasps. "He tried, and he failed. That has consequences."

"Uh," he says. "Who failed?"

"But I wasn't there," they say. "I wasn't there, so how did I—but the universe itself shudders, with a thing like that. What were the consequences? Something like that shouldn't be interrupted."

This must have been some dream.

"Something like what?" he asks.

Eret looks directly at him for the first time, though he has the strangest feeling that they're not seeing him at all. He can't see directly behind their glasses, but around the edges, there's something like a pale glow. But he must be seeing things, some kind of weird reflection. Of the moon, maybe, or the stars.

"Dream tried to resurrect him," they say. "But he couldn't finish. That's a dangerous magic to tamper with. You never, ever start a spell that you can't see through to the end. And it had its blood."

"Uh," he says. "Sure thing. What exactly are you talking about?"

Eret falls silent. And then, they say, "Fundy?" Their voice is normal again, though he still can't quite put his finger on what the difference was.

"Yep, that's me," he says. "Seriously, are you okay?"

"I'm—fine," Eret says, and then again, "I'm fine." They sound far more confident the second time. "Sorry, I was—dreaming. I've been having a lot of strange ones of late. It's nothing to be concerned about."

"Dreams can be weird," he agrees.

Eret laughs. "Quite." They stretch, tilting their head to side to side, wincing when something cracks. "Thank you for waking me. I'm not quite sure why I decided that was a good position to sleep in."

"That's what I was thinking," he says, and Eret smiles, bringing their knees closer to their chest and laying an arm across them, twisting their torso to turn toward him more. It makes something burn in his chest, a comfortable warmth, at being given their full attention.

"Was there something you'd like to talk about?" they ask, and that warmth grows. "I can't imagine you came up here just to prevent me from getting a crick in my neck."

"I mean, that was part of it," he protests. "I wanted to be a good friend! But um, yeah, actually, there was something I really wanted to tell you." He hesitates, and Eret nods at him,

encouragingly. Now that he's here, about to say it out loud, he feels like his whole body is buzzing. It is kind of a big deal, actually, doing something like this. But he lets himself blurt it out. "I'm going to run for president!"

There's a beat, and then, Eret's face breaks into a wide grin.

"Really?" they say. "That's awesome! I'm really happy for you, man."

His tail starts wagging. "Yeah?" he asks.

"Of course!" Eret says. "That's a big deal. I'm really proud you're going for it. Do you have a running mate? And a name?"

He grins. "Niki's running with me," he says. "We're going to be Coconut2020."

Eret laughs again. "Coconut?" they ask. "Any particular reason?"

"Coconuts are good," he says. "We both like coconut. We've bonded over coconuts." He narrows his eyes. "Don't mock our coconuts."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Coconuts are good. Fair enough." Eret tilts their head. "What did Wilbur say, if I might ask?"

And just like that, his euphoria dies down.

"Oh," he says. "Right, um. Actually, you're the first person I've told! Other than Niki, of course."

"Oh!" He can hear the surprise in their tone, and he cringes away from it, a bit; he knows very well, of course, that Wilbur probably should've been the first to hear it. But it's not like what he doesn't know will hurt him, and he—he just wanted to practice. That's all. "Well, in that case, I'm honored." A pause, and then, "You're not worrying about it, are you?"

"What?" He laughs, and he definitely sounds nervous. "No. No, why would I be nervous?"

"I think you don't need to be," Eret agrees, leaning toward him a bit. "I know Wilbur's been busy these days, but he cares for you a lot. I think he'll be quite proud that you've decided to take the initiative."

"You think so?"

"I do. I wouldn't say you have anything to worry about."

"Okay."

He feels a bit better, hearing that, and he knows that Eret is right. He's never doubted his dad's love for him, after all, even if he's doubted Wilbur's faith in him in a lot of other respects, and this is exactly the kind of thing he needs to do to make him stop doing that second thing. To make him see that he's a man now, able to take care of himself, to do great

things. If he goes far in this election, if he manages to *beat* him, even, then he'll have to acknowledge how grown up he's become. Will have to look at him with pride in his eyes.

"Okay," he says again. "Thank you, Eret."

"Of course," Eret says. "I wish you the best of luck."

It's time for him to go, then. This practice went pretty great, actually. He feels like he can do this now. He feels good. Pumped. Hyped up.

"Thanks," he says. "Are you gonna go get some actual sleep now?"

"I might stay up a while longer," Eret says. They stretch, and then rise to their feet, and he follows their example. "I'd like to get a little more done with this tonight. And I'll admit, my dreams haven't been very kind to me lately." They pause, and he's not sure what to say to them; it always sucks, of course, to have nightmares, but he can't offer much more than a basic commiseration. "I can't help but feel like something's missing."

"From the tower?" he asks.

Eret smiles. "That too," they agree. "I like it so far, but it feels a bit plain."

He considers this for a moment. Eret's not looking at him, is staring out at the lands beyond, visible past the incomplete wall. They're absentmindedly twisting one of the bracelets around their wrist, and that gives him an idea.

"If you wanted to spice it up a little, you could always try some gold accents," he suggests, and Eret jerks, turning their head toward him. "I noticed you've been liking gold a lot lately."

He's not sure why that makes them go pale.

"Maybe," they say, softly. "Maybe." They smile again, but this one's a bit shaky. "I'll bid you good night, Fundy. And really, good luck. But don't get too worked up about it. You've got this."

He nods, grinning. "I've got this! Goodnight, Eret!"

He leaves Eret to their tower. It's to the office from here, and it's definitely well into the night by now, but he knows his way around this nation like the back of his hand, even in the dark, and there's plenty of torches to see by anyway. He considers, for a moment, that Wilbur might have already turned in for the night, but he casts that thought aside. Wilbur's always working, even long past when a reasonable person would have hit the hay.

Tommy accosts him just outside the building that's been serving for L'Manberg's headquarters, sliding out of the darkness with a smirk on his face and his hands in his pockets. Fundy regards him warily. Not that he doesn't like Tommy. He does, even if he's been a little weird lately. But that's an expression that screams trouble. And what is he doing out and about at this time of night anyway?

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asks, and Tommy raises an eyebrow.

“What, can’t a boy look?” he says. “Do you need me to avert my gaze? Are you perhaps up to some crime and wrongdoing?”

“What? No,” he says. Trying to decipher Tommy is, on occasion, like attempting to navigate a parkour course blindfolded. “I’m just—” He bolsters himself. Stands straighter, puffs his chest out. “I’m running for president. So I’m going to go tell Wilbur.”

He speaks it like the challenge that it is. As much as he likes Tommy, he’s competition in this case, as Wilbur’s running mate. Tommy’s mouth forms an ‘o’, and something flickers in his eyes.

“Really?” he says. “Well, good on you, getting in on it early. Before election night.”

He frowns. “Yeah? Aren’t those the rules?”

Tommy nods, and then doesn’t say anything else, and this, *this* is why Fundy thinks he’s weird. It’s like sometimes, he just says weird things without elaborating, or even without realizing that it’s something that should require elaboration. Tommy’s just a weird guy overall, really.

“Okay,” he says, more to fill the silence than anything else. “Is there something you wanted to talk to me about? Or can I just go in? And I’m not moving out of my house, before you start that again,” he tacks on.

“I’m telling you, the real estate in that area is not good. Rather not poggers,” Tommy says. “It’s a dodgy part of the SMP, it is.”

“The only one anywhere near there is Punz,” he says, exasperated, and immediately berates himself for letting himself be drawn into this conversation again. That’s another weird thing; apparently, Tommy has recently taken offense to the location of his house, and has made persuading him to move somewhere else a priority. He can’t tell whether he’s serious, or whether it’s a long and involved bit.

Tommy nods sagely. “Dodgy,” he says. “But nah, you go on in. Wilbur’s still there, far as I know. Good luck.” Tommy steps away, and then stops, frowning, and turns back. “But maybe make sure Wilbur knows that you running against him isn’t, like, you disowning him or some shit. He wouldn’t take that well.”

“Why would that mean I was disowning him?” he demands. Wilbur wouldn’t think that, would he? Surely, even he wouldn’t jump to so drastic a conclusion. Unless he would, and him doing this is going to ruin their relationship, and he’s making a terrible mistake. But no, he’s not going to think like that. If Wilbur does have that attitude, that’s on Wilbur. Not him.

“It wouldn’t,” Tommy says seriously. “But, y’know, one thing leads to another.”

“*How* would that lead to me disowning him?”

“It shouldn’t,” Tommy says, and then grins again. There’s less light in this one, less levity. It’s actually a little unsettling. “Don’t mind me. Go talk to Wil. See you later, Fundy.”

“Okay,” he says. “Bye, Tommy.” He watches as Tommy walks away, and realizes, with some frustration, that he forgot to ask why, exactly, Tommy was hanging around here. Oh, well. He can’t let himself get worried about what Tommy’s doing, even if it’s always best to have half an eye on the guy. Trouble follows him.

But then, trouble kind of follows all of them.

He goes inside, and finds his way to Wilbur’s office. It’s not difficult; he’s been here before, though not often. The door is closed, and he hesitates in front of it, his nerves flagging. But then, he inhales, remembers Eret’s excitement and encouraging words, the way that Tommy didn’t make any disparaging remarks, and—he can’t expect a completely positive reaction, probably. He’s declaring himself as a political rival to his own father.

But he doesn’t need the reaction to be entirely positive. He just wants to look Wilbur in the eyes and see *respect* there.

He knocks.

Waits a beat.

“Come in,” comes the voice, and he slides the door open.

Wilbur’s at his desk, chin propped up on his hand, glasses slipping down his nose. His eyes are focused on whatever paper’s in front of him, narrow and squinting as they dart across the words, and his other hand grips a pen tightly, though he doesn’t seem to be doing anything with it at the moment. After a second, he glances up, and his gaze locks on Fundy, and Fundy suddenly feels very, very unprepared.

“Hello Fundy,” Wilbur says, and he sounds a little unsure, like he has no idea what he could possibly be doing here. He feels a little bitterness start to well up. “Is something the matter?”

Of course that’s his first instinct. That something has to be wrong. Because he thinks of Fundy as a child, always getting into scrapes, always needing help.

“No,” he says. “Nothing’s wrong. But can I talk to you for a second?”

Wilbur sets the pen down, sits up a little straighter. “Of course,” he says. “I’ve always got time for you.”

Then where have you been? he doesn’t say. Why are you always working? How come you almost never do anything else these days? And even when you’re around, why do you act like I’m still a little kid, like I didn’t fight in your revolution, like I haven’t been here the whole time?

“Great,” he says. “That’s great. Listen, I’ve got something to tell you.”

“Alright,” Wilbur says, slowly. “Go on.”

He takes in a deep breath.

"I'm running for president," he says.

For a moment, there is silence.

"I see," Wilbur says, still slowly, like he's working through it in real time, and he continues, feeling an odd burst of panic, like he needs to get all of it out now, before Wilbur can reply, can say anything, can shut him down or question him or anything like that.

"I haven't marked my name down yet, but that's my next stop," he says. "Me and Niki, we're going to be Coconut2020."

"You and Niki," Wilbur repeats, and he nods.

"Me and Niki," he says, and then pauses. It's out there now. He's said it. And Wilbur's just staring at him. He's got no idea what that expression's supposed to be. It just kind of looks—blank. Which, frankly, is not the reaction he was hoping for, and he shifts uncomfortably. "So, yeah. That's what I was here to say."

Wilbur is quiet for a long, long moment.

"Have you thought this through all the way?" he asks, voice quiet.

"What? Yeah, of course I have." He crosses his arms. "This is what I want to do. You're not gonna be able to change my mind."

"But—why, then?" Wilbur asks. The blankness is finally fading, replaced by—Fundy's not even sure what, but he is sure that it's not anything good. Which makes anger rise up in him; honestly, who is Wilbur to deny him, at this point? Why does Wilbur think he gets a say in this when he's barely spoken to him at all, these past weeks? "Why do you feel the need to—do you think I'm not suitable? Is that it?"

"Not everything's about you, Wil," he says. Even though this kind of is. But not in the way he's thinking. "I think I'd be a good president, so I'm running. That's all it is. It's not that complicated."

"I think it is a bit complicated," Wilbur says, "considering you're my son. I—I didn't expect this from you."

That's the whole point, he doesn't say. *You never expect anything from me.*

"It's not," he insists. "It's not complicated. Don't make it into something it's not. I'm running. That's all. This isn't—my being your son doesn't come into it."

"I disagree," Wilbur says. "I—you do realize what you're doing, don't you? I've never wanted us to be enemies, Fundy. But this—we'll be opponents. I won't hold back just because you're my son. An election's an election. Even if—and that's a side of me you've never had to deal with. That I've never wanted you to deal with."

Despite himself, doubts flit across his mind. Did he think this through? But then, he hardens his resolve. This is what he wants. To challenge Wilbur. To make him back down, if he can

manage it. To force him to acknowledge him as someone to be reckoned with. And if that comes in the form of taking his country from him, then all the better, right? Wilbur won't be able to ignore him then.

"I can hold my own," he says, and before he can stop himself, he continues, "And why does this even matter so much to you, anyway? Why do you need to be the one in charge?"

If he's not mistaken, he thinks Wilbur rears back a bit, at that question. But it's difficult to tell. Wilbur never lets anything show that he doesn't want to, making him frustratingly difficult to read.

"I founded this country, didn't I?" Wilbur says. "Didn't I lead us? I just want to continue to protect this nation. I want to be able to do what's best for it. I want to see it flourish, and be strong, and—if it's the people's will that that happens under someone else's hand, I'll accept that. But if I can continue to guide L'Manberg, then I want to do so."

"I mean," he says, "it kind of felt like Tommy was the one who won it for us."

Wilbur stills. And then, inclines his head, lips twitching up. It's a smile, though for some reason, Fundy has a hard time seeing any joy in it, any happiness at all. But then, he's probably reading too much into things, putting emotions into an expression that simply aren't there. Because when Wil's not being overbearing, he's being distant. There's really no inbetween.

"That's true," he says. "Tommy did."

Silence falls again, thick and stifling.

"Um," he says, after a second, "that was all I had to say. I think I'll just go, now."

"Alright," Wilbur says, and it doesn't seem like he's going to say anything else, so Fundy turns to the door, an odd emotion settling into his stomach. It might be disappointment—he's not sure that he got what he wanted from it, though the fact that he was able to rile Wilbur up at all is an accomplishment. And he managed to hold his ground, and he thinks that says something.

Except then, Wilbur says something else, and it gives him pause.

"I am proud of you, though," Wilbur tells him, and he stops before his hand closes around the door handle, fireworks going off across his skin.

"Yeah?" he says, and turns around again. Wilbur's still looking at him, meeting his gaze evenly, though there is something tight about it, something off. But he's smiling, and Fundy decides not to examine any of it too closely. Because the words rattle around in his brain, in his heart, and then settle.

"Of course," Wilbur says. "I suppose I don't say that to you enough, but I always am. And in this—I'd be lying if I said I liked the decision. I don't want this to—" He stops, and swallows, an oddly audible break in the flow of his words. "But that's me, isn't it? Good on

you for—for having the balls, I guess. For going after what you want. Just be sure that you can handle it.”

A double-edged sword, then. How many times does he have to say that he can handle something before Wilbur finally believes it? But still, he said he’s proud. That he always is. And that has to mean something. Has to mean everything, in the end.

“I can,” he says. “Thanks, dad.”

Wilbur smiles again. Oddly, it still doesn’t look happy. But it’s very likely that he’s stressed and tired anyway. He didn’t consider that before. Maybe he really should’ve waited for another time to bring this up, another time that wasn’t late at night. But what’s done is done, and he’s said his piece, and Wilbur wasn’t quite enthusiastic but he did say that he was proud of him, which all in all, is much better than it probably could have gone. His chest is buzzing, still.

So he smiles back at Wilbur, and exits his office.

And later, after he’s made everything all official and he’s meeting with Niki in her bakery, going over their plans and forming his own in the back of his mind—a last resort, just in case it looks hopeless—she asks him, “How did it go? Telling him?”

And he considers that for a moment.

“Honestly,” he says, “I think it went pretty well.”

Chapter End Notes

Haha Wilbur's totally fine and not at all highly depressed and doubting his capabilities and value as a person, especially now that his own son's declared a party against him haha.

But really though, do keep in mind that Fundy's not the most reliable narrator when it comes to Wilbur, in more ways than one. He's not a perfect parent, of course, but he's trying, and while Fundy's feelings are totally valid, he's also unaware of the mental health issues Wilbur's currently dealing with. So there's that.

And uh... Tommy's doing his best, like I've said. But he's definitely in a position where he'd focus on the final fallout of Wilbur and Fundy's relationship rather than what led up to it. Oops.

[My tumblr!](#)

Next up, Chapter Nine: In which the election draws near, and Tubbo's got a lot on his plate, but not so much that he hasn't noticed how off Tommy's been acting. Maybe it's time to confront him on it.

Tubbo II

Chapter Notes

Hello, I come bearing new chapter!

But also just fyi, I wanted to let y'all know that I'm back at in-person school again, so I really just have no idea how often updates are gonna come from here on out. Free time already feels like a myth lmao. So if I ever go a long(er) stretch of time without updating, it's because I'm buried in coursework.

And same goes for answering comments too, btw. I want to keep answering them, especially because I am absolutely delighted to read your theories on what's happening! But if I don't answer yours for a long time or at all, please know that it's not because I didn't read it, because I did, and I guarantee it made me so happy. I'm just. So busy right now lol

That's all in the way of announcements, I think! No content warnings for this chapter other than swearing, but that's probably a given by now.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tubbo feels adrift.

It's not an emotion he does well with, if it's even an emotion at all and not just a strange, unsettling state of being. By all rights, he shouldn't be dealing with this at all; it's not as if there's not anything to do, not as if he's not a member of Wilbur's cabinet and not as if he's not trying to corral the candidates into productive debates and not as if they haven't just finished handling Sapnap's pet-murdering bullshit. It's not as if he's not busy. Not as if he doesn't have purpose. *Adrift* is not a word that should apply to him.

But then again, it's not as if he doesn't know why he feels it.

It's Tommy.

So many things come back to Tommy, at the end of the day. Normally, it's not a bad thing. There's no place he'd rather be than at Tommy's side. But that's just it, though, is the problem in a nutshell, because Tommy's side is a place he finds himself less and less frequently.

Not in a literal sense. Tommy's still around all the time. Is still around him. Physically, at least. But Tubbo's known Tommy for years, and that means he knows how to read him, which is why it's troubling that he doesn't know how to interpret the look in his eyes half the time, all dark and distant, like he's miles and miles away, staring at something that Tubbo can't see. Staring past him, past everyone.

It's scary, if he's being honest with himself. And scarier still that Tommy's trying to hide it, that whenever he tries to so much as hint at something being the matter, Tommy laughs and says something loud and obnoxious and deflects and changes the subject and refuses to tell him anything at all. Which is so fucking *wrong*. Since when does Tommy keep secrets from him? Since when does Tommy *have* a secret that he can't trust him with?

Sometimes, he thinks that he's imagining it, is making up the whole thing, is getting lost in his head and inventing problems where there are none, just because he has been a little stressed recently, what with everything. But then, he'll see someone else make a sharp motion, and Tommy will jerk away, face shuttering, and he knows that he's not inventing any of it.

Because Tommy always tries to play it off, but Tommy reacts that way to lot of things, nowadays.

And Tubbo doesn't know what to do, because Tommy won't even tell him what the problem is.

So, he resorts to the only action he can think to take. He goes against one of the only things Tommy *has* told him, that first night when he started acting off.

He decides to talk to Wilbur about it.

"I think there's something wrong with Tommy," he says. Blurts out, more like, no dancing around it at all, but dancing around it would hardly help anyone. It's certainly not helping Tommy.

From behind his desk, Wilbur puts his pen down, signaling his full attention. The sun shines through the window behind him, late afternoon light casting the office in a gentle glow. Wilbur is backlit against it, painting his features in slight shadow.

"In what way?" Wilbur asks. "Has he said anything to you?"

"No," he says, "and that's sort of the issue. He keeps acting weird, but he won't talk to me about it. He just pretends like, like I'm dumb or something, or that I'm making shit up. But I'm not. And then he keeps on acting weird, and it's like he doesn't expect me to notice it." Wilbur's staring at him evenly, calmly, and he feels a burst of desperation—he's not making this up, he's *not*, and he doesn't want Wilbur to believe that he is, to believe that he's jumping at nothing, to dismiss him. "He keeps saying weird shit, and he flinches sometimes, or he looks at people really strangely, like he thinks they're—like he thinks they're ghosts or something. Or like Herobrine incarnate—did you *see* the way he was glaring at Awesamdude the other day when he came by? It's—I swear there's something wrong with him, I'm not even joking. Really, really wrong."

His own words burn a little in his mouth, and his brain summons up a memory: the dark of night outside, Tommy clinging to him with the fervor of a dying man, the sentence like an exploding firework, far off. *You have to stay alive.*

As if he thought Tubbo was planning to do anything differently.

It takes a second for Wilbur to speak.

“I’ve noticed,” he says, and the weight in his tone prevents Tubbo from feeling most of the relief the statement provokes. The relief that he’s not alone in this, that someone else has seen what he’s seen. “Since the night he gave up his discs.”

“Yeah,” Tubbo agrees, and then he falls quiet. For a moment, Wilbur doesn’t say anything else either, but then he sighs, leaning forward.

“Tubbo,” he says, in that way of his that means he’s about to make a pronouncement of some sort. Tubbo leans in too, mirroring him. “I will be completely honest with you. I was hoping that whatever’s wrong, Tommy was talking to you about it. Because he’s certainly not talking to me.”

He feels his hopes die in his chest. He hadn’t realized how much he wanted Wilbur to have an easy solution. Or a solution at all. Wilbur always seems to know what to do.

But not, it seems, in this case.

“He’s not,” he says, and now the words just taste sour. “He’s not talking to me. He’s never not talked to me. I don’t know what the hell is going on.”

Something flashes on Wilbur’s face, too quick to process.

“Neither do I,” he says, and grimaces. “I’m not fond of that. I imagine you’re not either. I wish I had an answer for you, Tubbo, but I—I’m worried about pressing him on this. He seems fairly quick to close himself off lately. I’m sure you’ve noticed that as well. And he’s not come to me with anything.”

Tubbo’s certain he’s not mistaking the note of despair in his voice. The words, *not like he used to*, go unspoken. In a way, it almost makes him feel a little better, that whatever this is, Tommy’s not trusting Wilbur with it, either, not trusting the man who he’s adopted as an older brother, and who has adopted him in turn. Or at least, it would make him feel a little better, if it weren’t so damn worrying.

If Tommy didn’t seem to be caught up in something beyond his understanding, or control.

“So I can only guess,” Wilbur continues after a moment. “I considered the idea that something else happened that night. Something he hasn’t told anyone. The only trouble with that is I don’t know what could have happened that he’d feel like he couldn’t share.” He pauses, and when he goes on again, his voice is softer. “He already gave up his discs. For—for all of us. For L’Manberg. I don’t know what would have been worse than that, for him.”

“Yeah,” he agrees. “He didn’t—I mean, he didn’t die. He didn’t die, and no one else did, so I don’t—do you think this could be about the discs, still? I mean, those were important to him. To us. But to him most of all.”

Wilbur’s eyes flash again, and Tubbo notes idly that he doesn’t have his glasses on. He probably should—it strains his eyes to read without them, so Tubbo’s not sure why he

wouldn't be wearing them right now.

"Maybe," Wilbur says. "Maybe that's what this is. Though I wouldn't have wanted him to—Tubbo, you know I wouldn't have wanted him to, right? Under any circumstances. I never would have asked it of him, and especially not if I knew it would affect him this badly."

"I know," he says. He's a bit surprised Wilbur feels the need to ask, but there's an odd insistence in the question.

Maybe he's just stressed. Prime knows they all have been, these past few weeks, and Wilbur most of all. He's running in an election at the same time as running the actual country, and that's got to weigh on anyone.

"The way he looks at me sometimes," Wilbur says softly, shaking his head. "It's as if—I don't know. I shouldn't—sorry, Tubbo, I don't mean to ramble. You've got as much on your plate as any of us." And Wilbur smiles, but for some reason, it feels fake. Plastered on. Like an expectation, the fulfillment of a role.

"I mean, yeah," he says, shaking the oddness off. "But stuff about Tommy isn't stuff that I've got to put on my plate, y'know? It's just—important. Not something to check off a to-do list."

Wilbur's gaze softens. "I know," he agrees. "I feel the same way. He's my—well. You know."

"Everyone knows," he says.

"I can only hope," Wilbur replies. He glances down at his desk, eyes flitting across his papers, the pen he's set down, and then back up to Tubbo's face. "But, Tubbo, if I can be completely frank, I think that out of everyone, you've got the best shot at getting him to talk to you. He's—I mean, he's your best friend, and you're his, right? Part of a pair, you are. So even if he won't—or doesn't feel like he *can* talk to the rest of us, he might talk to you."

"Maybe," he says. "I haven't had a lot of luck so far." He frowns. "You really think he won't say anything to you?"

He almost regrets the question, because it puts an expression on Wilbur's face. Not a very nice one, and it's gone in an instant, but for a second, he looks intensely sad. And between one blink and the next, it's vanished, sort of like it's a practiced motion, covering up things like that.

No, he's reading too much into it. Surely.

They're all so stressed. He can't wait for the election to be over.

"I don't know," Wilbur says. "I don't want to count on it. I sort of doubt—and this could all be a moot point, of course. Maybe he just needs more time, and we're worrying about something that'll blow over. It's Tommy, after all. He's always been so resilient. But that means he's not going to talk about things until he's ready to talk. If he truly doesn't want to, we're not going to be able to make him. All we'll succeed in doing is making everyone miserable."

“What do I do, then?” he demands. “I can’t just not do anything. He’s—you told me you saw it, too. There’s something *wrong*.”

“I *know*,” Wilbur says, voice rising. “I know, I’ve been telling you that I know. I don’t *like* it, Tubbo. I just—” He stops, breathes in, and Tubbo notices that his hands were clenched into fists and are now relaxing, fingers uncurling to rest on the desk’s wooden surface. “We can try to be there for him. Be ready when he comes to us. Let him know that he can, even if he doesn’t want to right now. That’s what we can do, if nothing else. I don’t like it. But we can’t force anything out of him, so that’s the best thing, I think. We be there, as much as he lets us. And when he finally tells us what the problem is, we kill it with fire.”

That last part, he’s on board with.

“Alright,” he says. “I’ll do my best.”

And it occurs to him that he never told Wilbur about what happened that night, when Tommy came to him. In tears, acting so strangely, his voice wavering and wobbling and his whole body shaking like a leaf.

But Tommy told him not to tell Wilbur. He specifically asked him not to, so while bringing his general concerns to him was one thing, sharing that would be another. He’s not willing to break Tommy’s trust like that. Not unless things get truly desperate.

He thinks they’re not quite to that point yet. He hopes they’re not quite to that point yet.

“I know you will,” Wilbur says. “I never doubt you, Tubbo. And I’ll do my best, too. I promise.” He smiles, and it’s not as warm as Wilbur’s smiles once were, he thinks. But it is genuine, if tired, if concerned, if ever so slightly strained. “We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

“Somehow,” he agrees. “Thanks, Wilbur.”

“Of course. You’re always welcome to come talk to me.”

It does make him feel a bit better, talking to Wilbur. Knowing that he’s not alone in his concerns, at least, and the fact that he’s got Wilbur on his side is always reassuring. Wilbur’s like a light in the dark, a bit, the leader that they all look to, and his advice is always sound, always manages to be at least a little bit comforting.

So he tries to take it.

He tries to be there for Tommy, even if it’s difficult, at times, to stop himself from demanding answers, from taking him by the shoulders and shaking him until he admits that there’s something the matter, until he reveals what he can do to help him. Difficult not to react when he flinches, or when he stares at someone like they’re either a miracle or a ghost or something else entirely, or when he disappears without a word of warning only to reappear a few hours later as if he never went anywhere at all.

It’s difficult, but he tries. And sometimes, it’s almost like normal. Sometimes, Tommy grins at him with a gleam in his eyes and a bounce in his step, and they go off to try and rob

Sapnap or mess around a little with Ponk's lemon trees or get back at Fundy for the latest annoying prank. Sometimes, Tommy's all bluster and confidence and unwavering chaos, and it's like nothing's changed at all, even as the elections draw nearer.

Tommy's been very diligent about those. He even wrote a lot of the regulations, with a seriousness that Tubbo didn't know what to make of. But the rules have been working so far—everyone's declared their campaigns, there's been no unsavory endorsements, no signs yet of voter fraud or other such shenanigans, and everyone running is a citizen of L'Manberg.

Everything ought to be alright.

"Are you alright?" Tommy asks.

They're fucking around around the base of one of Eret's new towers. Tommy suggested grieving one, just a bit, as a little prank, but then backtracked the idea, so now they're just hanging around. Eret's not even here at the moment, he doesn't think.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he says. "Just got a lot on my mind, is all. Elections and whatnot."

Tommy snorts. "Don't think so hard about it," he says. "We've got this one in the bag. No way we don't get the popular vote, so long as everyone does it by the book."

"It's making sure of that that's the problem," he says wryly. "It's not as if we've got an impartial lawyer around here. I'd ask Big Q to help out, but Big Q's got a vested interest in fucking around with things. At least I can pretend to be neutral. Sort of."

Tommy makes a noncommittal sound. "You're doing great, Tubs," he says. "I'm telling you, this should go right."

"I'm glad you're confident," he says, and squints up at the tower. It's mostly stone, but nearer to the top, it seems that Eret has gotten a bit more elaborate. Gold glints in the afternoon light, just begging to be stolen. Maybe later, though, and only if Eret wouldn't be too bothered.

"I'm glad I've got something to be confident about," Tommy mutters, and he turns his head sharply. Tommy isn't looking at him, is staring off at where the walls are visible, not too far from here. "I worked hard on this, you know. It's fucking airtight, is what it is. I know what I'm doing."

"You did a good job with all the rules," he agrees. "I think Wilbur was impressed with how much thought you put into it."

Tommy blinks, and then puffs his chest out. "He better damn well be," he says. "I put so much thought. All of my thoughts, right there. So big and cool. I'm going to write a book of my thoughts, and it will be a bestseller, and everyone will read it and weep, that's how poggers it will be."

"They'll weep, alright," he says wryly. "Probably from the damage it will do to their eyes. And their brain cells."

“Shut the fuck up,” Tommy says. “Not my fault you don’t understand genius.”

“Genius is a word,” he says. “You’re right about that. Not sure you know what it means.”

“Why are you the way that you are,” Tommy says, rolling his eyes with great vigor. And then, to Tubbo’s surprise, he grabs his hand. “C’mon, let’s just go—fucking sit somewhere or something, I don’t want to do shit right now. It’s been exhausting, innit?”

He’s on the verge of pointing out that they’ve got a whole place where they normally go and sit, but Tommy doesn’t seem to be thinking about their bench. He leads him a few paces away from the tower and then flops on the grass, laying on his back and staring up at the sky. Tubbo joins him after a moment, situating himself right next to him.

“We’re almost there,” he says after a moment. “We’re almost done with it. Maybe then we’ll be able to get some good sleep.”

Tommy snorts. “It’s never done, on this server,” he mutters. “There’s always something else. There’s always—” He breaks off. “But yeah, you’re right. It should get better, at least. One less thing to try and be thinking about, I suppose.”

It’s on the tip of his tongue to ask what else Tommy is thinking about. What else is on his mind. But the question won’t be welcome, and he’s trying to be open and inviting and supportive, not pushy, no matter how much he wants to be, so he refrains. And Tommy doesn’t say anything else, just lets out a long breath, so for a while, they’re just lying there on the grass, watching the clouds drift by.

It’s peaceful. He can almost forget that there’s so much going on.

And then Tommy speaks up again.

“If I were to get you a baby zombie piglin,” he says, musingly, as if he’s speaking to himself, “would it have to be any particular one? Or do y’think you’d be alright with any? Like, like replacing a goldfish or something?”

And somehow, that’s the breaking point.

“Okay,” he says, sitting bolt upright, “what the fuck?”

“What?” Tommy says. “It’s just a question.”

“No, it’s not,” he—says. He says. He’s not snapping. He’s not angry—but there’s something bubbling up, boiling over, and if it’s not anger, it’s frustration, at the very least. “It’s not just a question. It’s weird. You keep doing this. You say weird shit and you don’t explain any of it, and I’m left trying to figure out what the fuck you’re talking about, and you—you’re not talking to me, Tommy! You’re not telling me anything!”

Tommy sits up too, slowly, eyes wide, but he can’t bring himself to regret the outburst. Though maybe he will later.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Tommy starts, but he shakes his head hard, and the world blurs for a moment.

“That’s bullshit,” he says, and to his embarrassment, his voice cracks. “That is such bullshit. Do you honestly think I can’t tell something’s up? You can say that there’s not all you like, but that doesn’t change what you—you flinch when people get too close. You do weird things. You vanish and then come back without saying where you went, literally ever. You say shit that’s just—that’s just off. And then you try to brush it all off, but you can’t, you can’t brush this off, Tommy. Do you think I’m stupid?”

Tommy is completely, utterly silent. Tubbo tries to meet his gaze, but finds that he can’t, due to the fact that there are tears in his eyes, and everything is swimming.

“I just want to know what’s wrong,” he says, and doesn’t bother trying to disguise his misery. He’s gotten this far. Might as well let it all out. “I want to know what happened to you. I want you to let me help. I want you to tell me things, like you used to.”

“I can’t,” Tommy says, and his voice sounds alarmed, almost pleading, like he’s begging him to drop it. Well, he won’t. If he thinks he will, he’s got another thing coming. He’s let this drop too many times. Enough is enough. It’s time to push. “I can’t—there’s nothing going on, there’s not—not anything that’s a big deal or that you need to worry about, I just—”

“Stop lying,” he says. “Please, stop lying to me.”

Tommy goes quiet again. And that’s setting off all his head’s warning sirens, because Tommy never just goes quiet, but isn’t that just another thing to add to the list? Another response that isn’t as it should be? Mounting evidence that Tommy’s claim of being alright is just a bunch of horseshit?

“It was that night, wasn’t it?” he presses on, and his throat is closing up, but he chokes out the words anyway. It’s sudden, this sensation of being overwhelmed, but he’s powerless to stop it all from hitting. Powerless to keep himself from thinking about how there’s something wrong with Tommy, something wrong with his best friend in all the worlds, and Tommy won’t talk to him. “That night you came to me, and then you gave up the discs. Something else happened. Was it Dream? Did he do something? Or was it before that? Did something happen before you woke me up? Is that why you were crying? You’ve got to tell me, Tommy, please. I’m not letting this go. I shouldn’t have let it go before. I just thought—I thought you’d tell me, when you could, but you haven’t. You’ve been suffering, and I’ve just been watching.”

His voice cracks again. He can’t care.

“No,” Tommy says, almost a whisper. “No, Tubbo, no, that’s not it, there’s not—this isn’t something you can do anything about, Tubbo, that’s all. That’s all it is.”

“Do you not trust me, then?” he asks. “Is that it? Did I do something wrong?”

“No!” This is sharper, louder. “No—fuck, of course you didn’t. You haven’t done anything. You’re fine, Tubbo, it’s all fine, and I’m handling it. I’m doing alright.”

“But you’re not,” he says. “You’re not. You’re not alright.”

He blinks, hard, and the tears clear, finally. Tommy is staring at him, jaw slightly slack.

“I am,” he says, but Tubbo shakes his head again.

“You’re not,” he insists, before he can take that any further. “Why won’t you tell me about it? You know I won’t tell anyone else if you don’t want me to. You know that.”

“I know,” Tommy says. “I do know that, Tubs, c’mon—”

“But then why won’t you—”

“It’ll put you in *danger*,” Tommy snaps. “I’m not risking you!”

There are so many things he could say to that. Voicing the implication that whatever’s going on, it’s already put Tommy in danger, is high on the list, and it makes him sick to think that maybe Tommy just doesn’t care. Maybe he’s not paying any mind to the danger to himself, even as he worries about everyone else around him. But Tommy won’t listen if he says as much. He can tell already.

So he goes with his gut. Recalls the old conversation, puts together all the glances and the flinches and the stares when he thinks no one else is watching. Draws himself a picture, though he’s sure it’s still incomplete.

“Tommy,” he says, and tries to keep his voice level, steady, “I’m not going to die.”

Tommy’s face crumples like a wet sheet of paper, and there is a long pause.

“You don’t know that,” Tommy finally says, wavering and thready, and Tubbo doesn’t know why Tommy’s so scared, still. He doesn’t know what happened to make him fear this. And maybe he never will, if he can’t coax it out of him. But maybe that’s not so important at the moment, not more important than offering reassurance.

And that, he can do.

“I do know that,” he says. “Look, I’ll swear it right now. I’ll swear it on—L’Manberg itself. I’m not going to die.”

Tommy’s eyes go very pinched and squinty, and he bites down on his bottom lip, hard. Tubbo knows that look, so he extends his arms and tugs Tommy into him, into a hug, so that Tommy can cry without him seeing. He almost expects the embrace to be rejected, but after a moment of stiffness, Tommy melts against him, tucking his chin on his shoulder.

“You gotta have a little more faith in my abilities, man,” he says, aiming for some levity.

“I’m not so easy to kill.”

“I do have faith in you, Tubbo,” Tommy mumbles.

“Then let me help,” he says, and decides that a compromise is in order. “Look, you don’t even have to tell me everything. Or anything. But if there’s something I can do, let me do it. Let me help you. Whatever’s going on, you don’t have to be on your own. You don’t have to handle it by yourself or whatever stupid bullshit you’ve been on about.”

“It’s not as easy as that,” Tommy says, still barely discernible.

“I think it could be,” he replies. “I think you’re overthinking it.” He holds Tommy a bit tighter. “And really, I’m not gonna die, big man. And even if I did, you wouldn’t be rid of me that easily. I’d come back as a ghost and haunt you for eternity. Move your shit around when you’re not looking.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Tommy whispers, “and I don’t know why.”

Okay, that’s—okay. He’s not going to mess up the progress he’s made, even though he’d dearly love to comment on whatever the fuck that means.

“Alright, then,” he says, “but are you hearing me? Can you do that? Let me in, just a little bit? ‘Cause I mean, really. You’ve got to be able to trust me to look after myself. I appreciate you trying to protect me or whatever you’re doing, but not if you’re hurting yourself doing it. And not if you’re being stupid about it. ‘Cause I’m not some fragile fucking flower, you know? So can you? Let me help?”

Tommy shifts a bit, but doesn’t attempt to pull back, so Tubbo takes that as permission to keep holding him.

“Okay,” Tommy says, after a minute, voice small. “Okay, I’ll—I still can’t, I can’t tell you much, but I’ll try. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you think that I—that I didn’t trust you or some shit, that’s not it at all—”

He sounds increasingly distressed, so Tubbo cuts in.

“That’s fine,” he says. “We’re okay. Just don’t shut me out, alright? Whatever I can do, let me do it. That’ll be enough for now.”

Whether it will always be enough is another question. But, baby steps. Baby steps.

“Okay,” Tommy says. “Alright. I’ll try.”

He’s still crying. Tubbo doesn’t comment on it. Not even when Tommy finally pulls back, and his eyes are red-rimmed, avoiding his gaze. Not even when they go back to L’Manberg together, Tommy staring straight ahead except for when he’s not, except for when he casts little glances over to him, as if to check that he’s still there.

Tubbo’s gotten more questions than answers out of this. But he’s also gotten a promise.

He’ll hold him to his word. And he’ll make a private promise of his own.

He won’t die. And Tommy won’t either. They’re both going to come out the other side, and everything really will be alright again.

Chapter End Notes

:D

Tommy: are you alright?

Tubbo: do you mean like the debut EP from the hit indie band Lovejoy?

...That never would've made it in, but I needed you all to know that I was thinking about it.

[My tumblr!](#)

Next up, Chapter Ten: In which the election comes, and the election goes. And Wilbur Soot reflects.

Wilbur II

Chapter Notes

No overt warnings needed for this chapter, I think, but y'all know how the 'Wilbur Soot is Not Okay' tag is there, right? It's applied this whole time, but it's gonna start to get pretty obvious from here on out.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur wakes the morning of the election as President of L'Manberg, and he ends the evening of the election as President of L'Manberg, voted back into office by due democratic process.

There are things in between, of course. He reads out the results for all the SMP members to hear, as well as for those who have been following the event from different servers. He makes a speech, promises protection and safety for his citizens, promises renewed growth and prosperity and above all else, freedom from tyranny. He makes a good case for it all, he's fairly sure, though he forgets the words that he speaks as soon as he leaves his podium.

There's a bit of a celebration, after. Impromptu, unplanned, but those are the best kind. They all pitch in, scrounge up food and drink and games to play for when they get a bit tipsy, and it's good.

He smiles through it.

He smiles when Tubbo claps him on the back, hooting and hollering. He smiles when Niki runs up to him and throws her arms around him in an embrace, even though she was running against him. He smiles when Eret sidles up to him, murmuring congratulations and briefly pressing his hand. He even smiles when a few citizens of the Greater SMP come to join in, Sapnap and Punz and Ponk and Karl. He smiles and smiles and smiles, and why shouldn't he smile?

This is what he wanted. To know that his people continue to have faith in him, that they still believe him best for the job. To hold on to power, but to do it the right way. To be given full permission to assure the safety and freedom of those he loves, and the land that he has made.

The smile only slips twice.

Once: meeting Fundy's eyes across the way. Fundy breaks his gaze just as quickly, glancing to the side, and he doesn't come to speak with him. He's not sure what to do about that. He's not so blind as to not notice the tension that's sprung into place between them lately, though he still can't ascertain its origin. And it's only gotten worse now, of course—but what did Fundy expect, that he would just let him commit voter fraud? He's disappointed in his actions, and he can't disguise that. Shouldn't have to disguise that, because Fundy ought to know that wasn't the right thing to do. But that means that his son steers clear of him. And

he'll admit that it hurts. Both for that, and for the fact that Fundy would do such a thing in the first place.

So the smile slips, when no one is looking.

But that is once, and twice comes now: Tommy bounding up to him, grin bright and wild, eyes shining with a light that he hasn't seen there in—too long. Far, far too long. That light has been present all day, ever since he stepped up to the podium and announced the results, and Tommy let out a whoop and a holler and pumped his fist into the air like he was trying to punch the daylight from the sky, and it was so very Tommy that in that moment, he could feel nothing but relief. In general, Tommy's seemed very relaxed. Celebratory, jubilant. As he should be.

And now, here he is, beaming, staring him in the face, gripping his arms. Eyes shining.

"How we feeling, big man?" he asks, loud and carefree, and it's obvious from the way that he asks that he expects a certain kind of answer. Wilbur is more than happy to give it to him. He reaches out to ruffle his hair, and Tommy ducks away, but even that scowl doesn't last for long.

"I'm on top of the world," he says, and feels his own smile widen. For the first time in a while, he can look at Tommy and not feel pressing worry, not feel a tightness in his chest and a certainty in his bones that something is very, very wrong, that something has happened, and that in some way, he has failed. "We fucking did it, man."

"We sure fucking did!" Tommy crows. "You and me, best fucking—best fucking day ever. We're gonna make sure that L'Manberg's the best country in the literal history of everything. And you'll be the best president."

"Of course I will," he says. "That's why they've elected me."

Tommy nods sagely. Still grinning. Still bright-eyed. "It's all going to be alright," he says, voice lowering just a little. He sounds so very sincere. "Everything's actually gonna be alright. You're gonna do so great. You're gonna do great, right?"

Of course he will. He will not settle for anything less. This duty has been entrusted to him once again, and he will not let his city fail, nor his people fall. He is the one they look to. He built this nation, and he must protect it. He will be great. He has more than just his own hopes riding on his back, and anything less than greatness is unacceptable, both for his own sake and for that of everyone else, for his own legacy and for the seeds planted in the present.

"We're gonna do great," he says. "You and I, and all of us."

"Hell yeah," Tommy says, and glances around him, at the celebration, still under full swing. Quackity has somehow obtained a stripper pole, and both Karl and Sapnap are looking on in great interest as he displays his talents in that area. Wilbur finds himself watching for a moment too long before tearing his gaze away. But Tommy doesn't pay mind to any of that—which is *good*, because he is a *child*, a little *baby* man, and maybe he should go over to

Quackity and talk about him toning it down, actually, while the minors are here—and instead brings his focus back around to him again.

“They all love you man, y’know?” Tommy says, voice going softer still. He finds his own expression gentling to match.

“They love this,” he agrees. “They love L’Manberg.”

“Because what’s not to love?” Tommy says, nodding in satisfaction. “Really, though, man. You’re gonna be alright. You’re gonna do great. No reason to worry about anything, y’know?”

“Okay, that’s a little concerning, coming from you,” he says. “Are there any shenanigans I should know about?”

“Oh, fuck off,” Tommy says, swatting at his arm. “I’m gonna go find where Tubbo got off to. But just, have a good night, yeah, Wil? You’ve really earned it. Future’s looking up.”

“I will,” he says. “And you too, Tommy, you’ve earned this just as much as I have. Maybe even more. Go have fun.” He pauses. “And if there do happen to be any shenanigans, let me know, would you? It’s been a while since I took part in any good old-fashioned shenanigans.”

Tommy casts him one last grin, brilliant as any sunrise he’s seen. And then, he’s off, weaving through everyone else. It’s good, that he’s happy. It’s been so long since he’s seemed truly happy. It gives Wilbur hope. Whatever damage was done to him that night, when he chose to give up his discs, maybe he really will bounce back. And he’s noticed that he and Tubbo have been closer again, so maybe that will help, too. Tommy will be okay.

Then, a wave of exhaustion hits him, apparently out of nowhere, and his smile slips.

He brings it up again in the next moment. But the fatigue remains—and he supposes it makes sense. It’s been a long, rather stressful day. Perhaps it’s time he turned it in.

Niki’s the first one he finds, and she smiles at his approach. There is still an air of tension about her—lingering frustration, he imagines, at the stunt Fundy tried to pull. He believes her when she says she was unaware. But she doesn’t seem to have any qualms about him, thank goodness, because he bears her no ill will for the incident. Or even Fundy—he is disappointed to be sure, but he doesn’t love his son any less. Nothing at all could make that happen. Perhaps he ought to make sure Fundy knows that.

Later, though. When they’ve both cooled down a bit.

“Hey, Wil,” she says. “Good party, huh?”

“It is,” he says. “I’m sort of beat, though, so I think I might go hit the hay, as it were. Just wanted to tell someone before I left, in case anyone wondered.”

“Okay,” she says, and her eyes pinch around the edges a little bit. “Are you feeling alright?”

“Oh, yeah,” he says. “I’m fine. Just tired.”

She nods. "It's been a long day," she says, echoing his thoughts. "I'll let everyone know, if they ask." Her smile returns, full force, and she steps forward and takes his hand in hers. "Really, though, congratulations. I'm really proud of you. Anyone can see how much you care about this place, and that's why they want you to keep leading it."

His mouth has, unaccountably, gone slightly dry. "I do care," he says. "But we all do. I mean, you literally made our flag. I don't think I've told you enough how cool that is."

"I wanted to," she says simply, though she's obviously pleased. "You don't have to thank me for it. Every country should have a flag."

"And every country should have someone who cares enough to sew it," he says. "I'm glad it was you."

"And I'm glad that this is you," Niki replies, making a gesture toward the festivities around them, and the empty stage over to the side. Her eyes sharpen. "Even if I kind of wanted to be vice president. But you're a good leader, Wilbur, and you're a good man. A good friend. You deserve this. So go get some sleep, alright? Make sure you're taking care of yourself."

"Yes, ma'am," he says, saluting, and she rolls her eyes, pushing him away.

"Go on," she insists, but there is laughter in her voice and a crinkle at the corners of her eyes, and she looks happy, too. Everyone looks very happy. Even Fundy seems to be involved in things by now, and Quackity, his fiercest competition, appears to be enjoying himself.

Everyone is happy. So is he. There's no reason at all for him not to be.

He tells himself that he's going to go get some sleep, but his feet take him back to his office, instead. It's empty, cast in a dim haze until he switches on the light, and just like that, the darkness is gone. His eyes flit across his desk, his chair, his shelves, all the paperwork that he's definitely going to have to deal with, now that he knows for sure that he will continue to lead. He also has a potted plant, though he can't quite recall who gave it to him. Might have been Tubbo, but he's not sure.

He doesn't sit. He goes to the window, presses himself up against it close enough to see the outside rather than his own reflection in the glass. Torchlight flickers, illuminating the country before him, and the walls are looming giants in the deepening night. He can see the cluster of lights where the others are, too, and he can see their dancing shadows, glimpses of their faces, far away echoes of their laughter.

Maybe he ought to go back. Some part of him wants to. He's not sure why he's holding himself away.

It's probably because he's tired. Because he is. Tired. Very tired.

It *has* been a long day.

He watches for a moment longer, and then closes his curtains, shutting out the world beyond this room. He turns to his desk, then, and his paperwork, though he's loath to actually work

on anything tonight, despite the fact that there's a million things he could be doing. Drafting a formal missive to Dream, for instance, in light of his official election to power. Ensuring continued good standings between their nations—because as little as he likes the man, he's not going to provoke him again, if it can be helped.

Especially not with Tommy—the way that he is. Not until he's gotten to the bottom of that, and probably not even after.

So, he should write to Dream. He should also write to Phil. Tell him about what's been going on. He's been considering asking for advice on the whole Tommy situation, actually—Phil's old as *balls*, so maybe he might know what to do, or even what this could be about. It's a long shot, of course, but it's worth a try.

Except he doesn't particularly want to do either of those things. Not at the moment. But then, that doesn't leave him with a whole lot of options, so why did he come here in the first place if he didn't intend to do something? He ought to go to bed, like he said he would.

But then—

“Hey, Wilbur,” Quackity says, and he looks up, blinking. Quackity's leaning against the door frame, arms crossed. Somewhere along the line, he's regained his clothes. “Knock, knock.”

“Quackity,” he says. “Good to see you. Here, come in, pull up a chair.”

Quackity quirks a brow, but that seems to be all the invitation he needs. He all but saunters in, grabbing one of the chairs and tugging it right up against the desk.

“I actually did want to speak with you at some point,” he continues.

“Then this works out, doesn't it?” Quackity says. “I had the same idea. I figured we should clear the air or something like that. If it even needs clearing, I dunno. What do you think?”

“It certainly can't hurt to talk,” he agrees.

“Right,” Quackity says. “Well, I guess I should start off by saying good job. Congrats on winning.” He smiles, and there's something sharp in it, something of a challenge. Wilbur can't say that he hates it; it's good to be challenged, every now and then. And now, there's less danger in it, his position secure. “Though I really gave you a run for your money, didn't I? And Jack, of course.”

Jack's name is added as an afterthought. He's always had the impression that Quackity would rather have picked someone else for his running mate. But he left it fairly late, and by the time he decided that he definitely wanted one, there weren't many people left to choose from. Tubbo wouldn't have joined him, and Eret stayed out of the whole affair, and in terms of L'Manberg citizens, that pretty much just left Jack Manifold.

He wonders who Quackity would have chosen, if he'd had free reign of the SMP. Somehow, he's glad that didn't happen. Good foresight, on Tommy's part, to add that restriction. And a good idea in general, too.

“You did,” he says with a nod. “It was a good showing. You were the one I was worried about, to be honest with you. If anyone could have beaten me, it would have been you.”

“You’re damn right,” Quackity answers. “We got close. But no cigar, I guess. There’s always next time.”

Next time. *Next time.*

Right. Elections are a fairly regular thing. He’ll have to do this again.

Right, no, that’s—fine. It’s fine. And it wouldn’t be for a while yet, so he doesn’t even have to think about it right now.

“But I just wanted to make sure there were no hard feelings between us,” Quackity says. He leans back in his chair, tipping it so that only two legs rest on the floor, and he regards him. “I mean, I meant what I said on the campaign trail, and I still stand by it. I don’t know that you’re taking this country in the best direction, Wilbur. I don’t know that it’s not gonna—stagnate, under you, or that Dream won’t come up and declare war again. I meant all of that. But it’s not like I don’t like you as a person, and you’ve won fair and square, so I was hoping we could put our differences behind us. Let bygones be bygones and all that.”

He’s heard everything that Quackity has to say on the matter of his leadership, and hearing it all again is a bit—irritating. But the honesty is refreshing, was then and still is now, and he’d rather these things be said to his face than whispered behind his back.

And also, there’s the fact that it’s Quackity. It was Tommy who convinced him to let him join in the first place, but the man’s grown on him, he’ll confess.

“I would have trusted you to lead,” he admits, and meets Quackity’s gaze squarely. “I disagree with you on quite a few matters, but I believe that you have L’Manberg’s best interests at heart. So as far as I’m concerned, it’s all water under the bridge.”

He speaks nothing but the truth. Quackity is—not precisely the vision he has in mind for L’Manberg’s future. But he cares about this place, that much is obvious. So if Quackity had won, he would have bowed out gracefully, would have established himself some property and entered a graceful retirement, at—at peace. Surely at peace, all of his questions answered and his guidance unneeded. His person no longer required.

His stomach turns, a gut-churning combination of longing and revulsion flooding him, impacting him so intensely that it’s a half-second scramble to make sure that none of it shows on his face, to lock everything back down again, to be interpreted later or forgotten about, depending on his mood.

“That’s great to hear,” Quackity says. “Friends?”

Quackity sticks out his hand.

“Friends,” he agrees, and takes it.

“Fantastic,” Quackity says. “I guess that’s all I wanted to say. I’ll let you get back to whatever you were doing.” He gestures broadly, lips twitching upward. “Niki said you were gonna get some sleep, so I’d do that before she finds out you’re not.”

He can’t help but laugh, and Quackity stands. “I’ll take that under consideration,” he says. “Good night, Quackity.”

“Night, Wilbur,” Quackity says, and turns to go. But then, he stops in the doorway, looking back. “I just gotta ask, though, why all of this? Why have an election at all? Why risk losing? If you wanted to stay in charge, why not just stay in charge? No one would’ve questioned you, but instead, you put on all of this. Just to keep a position you ended up keeping anyway.”

Ah. His mind blanks for a moment, because he doesn’t know how to describe to Quackity the fact that people were already questioning him, if he didn’t pick up on that. But surely, he must have; Quackity himself built his entire campaign around questioning him. His right to lead, his capability, his intentions. And those sentiments could not have come from nowhere.

To be honest, he’s not certain that he has the words to explain it to himself, either.

“I could ask the same of you,” he says, “in regards to your running.”

Quackity stands there for a moment. And then tilts his head.

“I think we both know the answer to that, Wilbur,” he says, and his next smile is a wry thing. “See you tomorrow.”

And then, he’s gone.

And Wilbur does know.

He is not blind to Quackity’s desire for power. His desire to do something good with it, to be sure—he’s never caught any malice in his seeking. But what he seeks is power, and there is no mistaking that. Sometimes, Wilbur looks in his eyes and sees a reflection of himself. Paler, different, slanted, but a reflection nonetheless. He has heard the siren’s call of ambition and heard it well, and he recognizes that in Quackity, and Quackity recognizes it in him.

But it’s not just about power. Not for him, anyway. Or rather, it is power, to be sure, but it’s the power to keep safe. To protect. To be free. And to build something great, something that will outlive him, something that will make him worthy of the looks in people’s eyes when they meet his. That’s what it was about. And that’s why the election mattered.

Though for a moment, he lets himself picture it: retirement. A house, with plenty of room. Time to spare, for everyone and everything. A guitar, finally tuned again. A warm summer’s day, and a crisp autumn’s evening. No pressure, few responsibilities, and an hour or several to sit under his own vine and fig tree.

But he doesn’t think he’s made for things like that, really.

And even besides, these idle speculations don't matter. Quackity didn't win, and he remains president of this nation. There will be no quiet retirement, not yet. There is so much work that he has to do, and he can feel all those future tasks piling on his shoulders, weights stacking on his skin, clinging like barnacles on a weathered, abandoned pier.

And it's all alright, because it's what he wants.

Without this, where would he stand? With himself, and with the others? They all look to him for a reason, so what would happen if that reason were gone?

No. Best not to let his mind wander down that path.

His ambitions are realized. The elections are over. His people are happy, and they still want him. They still believe he can do right by them. They are celebrating his victory even now. Tommy was smiling, and there was none of that strange, terrifying darkness in his gaze.

He has everything he wants.

He checks his communicator, idly. There's a few messages from people on the server, those who aren't at the party. Most are congratulatory. There's Dream, asking for a meeting already, but he anticipated that. There's even a few messages from people off-world, and he raises an eyebrow at those—inter-server communication costs a pretty penny, so he's a bit surprised that Technoblade put the effort in to send a message that just says *lame*. Or maybe he shouldn't be surprised at all. And Schlatt's sent him some snarky congratulations, and he supposes he should answer him, since he went through the trouble. Though he's not going to invite him, still, no matter how nice it might be to catch up. Not until he figures out what Tommy's problem with him is, and whether it's solvable.

But he types out a response to both, a quick *Like you can talk, Potato Man* to Techno and something a bit longer and properly sarcastic to Schlatt, wincing at the cost of shooting the messages through the void, across worlds, and then sets his communicator to the side. Stares at his desk, then at the covered window. He can still hear them.

He stopped smiling at some point. He doesn't know when.

He picks up his pen, then sets it back down again. Drags a paper closer with his index finger, and then pushes it back. Slips his hand into his pocket to find his glasses, and then brings it out again, empty of everything but dust.

There's work to do, and he should either get started or he should go to sleep, but his brain doesn't seem to want to get the memo. So he sits.

He's tired. That's why he's in this kind of mood. He's tired, so he'll just sit here until he feels ready to get some true rest, and it'll all look better in the morning. Not that it doesn't look good now.

But he is very tired.

Chapter End Notes

Tommy: Wilbur's won the election so he's gonna be fine :D So glad I managed to avoid that crisis :D What a relief :D

Wilbur: You are so right everything's great :D

If I were to divide this fic into acts, this would mark the end of Act 1. With that in mind, I'll be adding some new tags sometime before posting the next chapter, so keep an eye out for those! I've got the next ten or so chapters planned out, and I'm very, very excited to write them

[My tumblr!](#)

Next up, Chapter Eleven: In which big man Jack Manifold is roped into doing some manual labor.

Jack

Chapter Notes

Once again, no additional content warnings needed for this chapter, I think. But I did add some new tags to the fic last night, so you might want to take a glance at those if you haven't already.

Welcome to Act II :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Tubbo comes to him, asking his help on a project that he and Tommy are working on, he doesn't expect the project to be ripping up the open field near Punz and Fundy's houses and laying down a fuck ton of obsidian on it, but hey. He doesn't think there's been what could be called a normal day since he first got here and put on the L'Manberg uniform, so he knows how to roll with it, to a degree.

He's got questions, though.

"Why the fuck," he says.

It's Tubbo standing next to him, because Tubbo was the one to lead him here. Tommy's standing a bit further off, attacking a patch of land with a shovel, and with great gusto, too. Already, there's a few areas that glitter with reflective black stone rather than green grass or cool dirt. But not a lot. If this is really what they want to do, they've got a long, long way to go.

And Tubbo has the nerve to shrug at him.

"Even I'm not sure on this one," he says. "Honestly, I'm just kinda glad Tommy wanted my help on it at all."

There's some stuff to unpack there that he doesn't care enough to unpack. Tommy and Tubbo's friendship is none of his business. And honestly, he doesn't even know Tommy all that well. For all that Tommy's the one who invited him into L'Manberg in the first place, he hasn't seen much of the guy. He's not sure what to make of that.

"And since it's gonna take so much work, I thought it might be nice to bring you in on it," Tubbo continues. "Only if you want to, of course."

"I mean, I'm down," he says. "I'm still—really confused about why you're making this a thing, but I'll help. I don't exactly have much else going on at the moment."

“You don’t,” Tubbo agrees airily, which—okay. “Nice to not have a lot to stress about, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he agrees, though a bit uncertainly. He—hadn’t exactly been worrying about much to begin with. Not even during the elections. Sure, it would’ve been nice to win, but he wasn’t counting on it. And it was also pretty obvious that Quackity would rather have chosen someone else for his running mate, so it was kind of hard to get enthusiastic about the whole event. Kind of hard to get excited when he was right in the thick of things and still getting looked over by everyone else.

But oh, well.

“Here, c’mon, let’s get over there,” Tubbo says. “I’ll show you our obsidian stash. We’re gonna need more at some point, but we’ve found some lava pools we can use. Mining’s gonna be a pain in the arse, but there’s no real way around that.”

“Right,” he says. “Yeah.” And then they walk over to Tommy, and Tommy looks up, and something—happens. In Tommy’s face. He’s not quite sure how to describe it. It almost looks like a spasm of some sort, but that’s not quite right, because it also looks kind of like an actual expression. Except, it’s a confusing one, and Jack can’t even begin to interpret it before it’s gone, smoothed over again. Which is why it looks like a spasm more than anything else.

“Ayup, Tubbo,” Tommy says. “Jack Manifold.”

“Ayup, Tommy,” he says, and Tubbo echoes him, a beat later. And then, for a second, there’s a really awkward silence. He knows he’s not imagining it, because Tubbo’s giving Tommy a look of some kind, now, one that he doesn’t want to stare at too much, because then it’ll be very obvious that he’s aware that something’s weird about this, and he doesn’t know if that would make things better or worse.

He should probably just ignore it.

“So,” he says, definitely too loudly, “I hear we’re laying down a shit load of obsidian.”

And just like that, the moment is gone. The tension dissipates. The awkwardness doesn’t quite vanish, but it levels out some. And Tommy grins at him. There’s some tooth to it.

“You heard correctly, Jack Manifold,” he says. “Would you say you’re up to the task of helping us out?”

“Would I be here if I weren’t?” he returns, and Tommy’s grin widens.

“Knew you weren’t a pussy,” he says, as if that has—literally any bearing on something like this. They’re just digging up a bunch of dirt and laying down a bunch of stone in its place. It’s not like it’s difficult. Just grueling. Sort of boring. He supposes that part of his hope here is that it’ll turn out that this is step one of some larger plan. Something actually worthwhile.

But again, even if it doesn't end up being that way, it's not as though he has anything better to do.

In any case, that seems to be that. Somehow, he's gotten the Tommyinnit seal of approval. So Tubbo shows him to where the obsidian is—and they've got a good bit of it, several chests full, though he's right that they're going to need more if they're going to cover this whole area—and where they're putting the spare dirt, and then, it's pretty much just—doing it. Taking up a shovel and digging, pausing to lay down the obsidian at semi-regular intervals. It's monotonous. Nothing special about it. Tommy doesn't even seem all that keen on conversation, though Tubbo tries to engage both of them a few times, and that tends to go alright.

He's not really sure what to think about Tommy, honestly. On one hand, he thinks he might like to be friends with him, if he could be. He thinks they might get along. But on the other hand, Tommy seems like kind of a closed off type of guy. Like he's trying to keep him at arm's length. Which is fair. Tommy can do whatever he wants. There's no obligation here or anything. But that leaves him to sort through some signals that are, admittedly, a bit mixed.

There's time for that, though. It's a big project. And they're not at it all hours of the day, every day, but often enough that they manage to make some real progress. On whatever this is for.

The one time he asks, Tommy grins at him again, and tells him that it's to, "Look fucking sick." And he adds, as an afterthought, that it's going to, "Tank Punz's property value." Which, alright. Jack's always down to meddle with the housing market.

They're at it for a good while. This has the added benefit of people noticing that he's off somewhere other than L'Manberg, doing something other than absolutely nothing, which is somewhat gratifying. Niki's the first to ask him about it, when he stops by her bakery one morning for a bite to eat before meeting up with the other two.

"Just messin' around with Tommy and Tubbo," he tells her, because he's not actually sure how to explain the details, or even if there are details to explain. But even just that much makes her face brighten a bit.

"That's good to hear," she says. "Are you guys having fun?"

He considers this.

"I think so," he says. It's not as if it's the most thrilling activity in the world. But he likes to spend time with Tubbo, at least, and even if Tommy's a bit distant, he really does seem like an alright sort. And they're all getting along just fine, and as time goes on, they're talking to each other more as they work on it, so honestly. It is kind of fun, just hanging out like they are.

"I'm glad," she says, and then pauses. "Could I ask what it is you guys are doing? Or is that a secret?"

“Not a secret, I don’t think,” he says. “I’m—pretty sure it’s some kind of prank on Punz. We’re just putting a bunch of obsidian in a field.”

She raises an eyebrow.

“That sounds like—an interesting prank,” she says, because Niki’s always tactful. But he can tell that she really means that she has no clue what to think about that. Which is fair, as he still doesn’t either.

“I guess we’ll see how it turns out,” he says.

She laughs. “You’ll have to let me know,” she says. “Here’s your bagel.”

“Niki, you’re a godsend,” he says, and she laughs again, which makes him feel pretty good about himself as he leaves. When Niki’s happy, it feels like things are going right.

But then one thing leads to another, of course. He probably should’ve thought of this before he told Niki what they were doing—not that he would’ve lied to her or anything; he just should’ve remembered this little detail—but Niki and Wilbur are really close. Best friends level of close. He’s also pretty sure that Niki actually holds the title of First Lady of L’Manberg or whatever, which, he’s not entirely sure what that means, but it sounds like something, at least. The point being that, what Niki knows is liable to make it back to Wilbur one way or another. Unless he asked her not to tell Wilbur, of course, because he’s sure she wouldn’t share something told in confidence, but he didn’t do that.

Which is presumably how they’ve ended up here: the president of L’Manberg standing at the edge of their placed obsidian, squinting out over the rock as if it’s some uninterpretable cipher.

“The fuck is this?” he asks, and he just sounds very confused. Which is fair, in his opinion.

“Uh, hey, Wilbur,” he says, and Wilbur’s attention snaps to him. “Don’t mind us. No illegal activities here. We’re not up to any funny business.”

“What?” Wilbur says. “I—literally do not give a shit. I just want to know what the fuck this is supposed to be.”

“Oh,” he says, and glances around him for some help. But he’s the only one who happens to be standing right here, and from what he can tell, Tommy and Tubbo don’t seem to have noticed that Wilbur’s here yet. “As far as I can tell, we’re pissing off Punz. Maybe. He hasn’t been by to yell at us or attempt murder yet, so I dunno if it’s working. But I think that’s the goal here.”

“Why the obsidian, then?” Wilbur asks. His eyebrows are scrunched together, his nose a little wrinkled. “There’s got to be about a million easier ways to pull that off. Why not build some penises in his yard and have done with it?”

He raises his hands. “Look, I’m not the one in charge here,” he says. “Tubbo just came and said to me, hi, Jack, my good friend, do you want to help us put down some inconvenient

stone all over the place? And I said, sure, Tubbo, that sounds like a great time. And here we are.”

“Is that how it went?” Wilbur asks, and he nods.

“It sure is,” he says.

“Well,” Wilbur says. “Alright, then. Just—try not to start another war, I suppose.”

“I—don’t think that’s the goal, here.”

Wilbur smiles, but it’s thin-lipped, humorless. “It almost never is,” he says. And then, he cups his hands around his mouth. “Oi, you little shits!”

The shout does what his mere approach did not, and alerts Tommy and Tubbo to his presence. Both their heads shoot up in unison, like rabbits hearing something bigger than them trudging through the undergrowth. It’s a little bit funny. And then, Tommy cups his hands around his mouth, too.

“Who the fuck are you calling a little shit?” he shouts back.

“You, you fuck!” Wilbur calls, pretty cheerfully. “Come over here!”

Tommy and Tubbo exchange a glance. And then, in the same motion, they both jam their shovels upright into the ground and walk over, wearing almost identical expressions: curiosity, mixed with a little anticipation. Tommy takes that a step further; there’s a light shining in his eyes, something bright and happy and perhaps even relieved when he looks at Wilbur, even as his face twists into a mock scowl. Jack wonders at it; he knows they’re brothers, or at least, as good as, but he didn’t take Tommy as one to be so openly affectionate.

Then again, watching Tommy come to a stop and cross his arms, perhaps the affection isn’t so open after all. One of those unspoken things, maybe.

“What are you doing here?” Tommy asks, bluntly, and this is followed up by Tubbo right on his heels, asking, “Is there something wrong? Did you need us for something?”

Wilbur laughs and shakes his head. “No,” he says, “nothing’s wrong. Does something need to be wrong in order for me to stop by? I just wanted to see what you were up to. I do notice, you know, when my cabinet members practically vanish for a week.”

Right. That’s—not referring to him. He’s not a cabinet member. He’s not anything other than an ordinary citizen.

“Oh, shit,” Tubbo says. “Sorry, boss man. We didn’t—” But Wilbur waves a hand, cutting him off.

“It’s not a problem,” he says. “I’m glad you’re having fun with—whatever this is. I would’ve come to get you sooner if I needed you urgently.” He pauses. “Are you really just trying to piss off Punz?”

“If he’s not a pussy, he’ll see how great and poggers this is,” Tommy jumps in immediately. “An obsidian field is, is fucking cool, is what it is. So if he gets pissed off, that’s not our fault.”

“Right,” Wilbur says. There’s another smile tugging at his lips. This one looks slightly reluctant, but entirely genuine. “Alright then, I’ll tell you what I just told Jack. Don’t start a war. Try not to break any laws where someone will catch you. But other than that, go wild. Have fun.”

“You wanna help us?” Tommy blurts out. Jack blinks. Even Tubbo looks a little surprised at that. Surely, Wilbur’s got more important things to be doing. All considered, he’s a very busy man. Jack wasn’t expecting him to show up here at all, since he seems to spend all of his time in that office of his. Running the country, presumably. And maybe Tommy gets that, because as soon as he speaks, he makes a little *harumph* sound. “Not that, y’know, we need you. But we’ve still got a bunch left to do, so if you wanted to hang out with us and be, say, *cool* for a little while instead of being boring and lame in your office all day, you could.”

“Me being boring and lame is keeping our country afloat,” Wilbur says dryly.

“I mean, yeah,” Tommy says, and then leans in, “but is it *really*?”

Wilbur reaches out and swats Tommy on the arm. Tommy bares his teeth and swats back, but Wilbur sidesteps, which leads to Tommy lunging at him, which somehow leads to Wilbur getting Tommy in a headlock, and this all happens so quickly that Jack barely has any time to step back and get out of the line of fire.

He’s going to assume that this is normal behavior.

And then, Wilbur releases Tommy from the headlock, straightens up as if nothing just happened at all, and says, “Fine. Children ought to have adult supervision anyway.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Tommy says. “I changed my mind. You’re uninvited. Go away.”

“Nah,” Wilbur says, and that is how Jack ends up shoveling dirt elbow to elbow with the president of L’Manberg. Not that it’s really that big of a deal; sure, the guy’s in charge and all, but he’s only a guy, if one that Jack certainly respects. He’s human just like the rest of them, and he gets all gross and sweaty just like the rest of them, shucking off his jacket when the afternoon sun gets unbearable.

But it’s nice, in a way. Jack almost feels as though he’s privy to something that not everyone gets to see. Wilbur Soot in his natural habitat, outside of his office and responsibilities. Flinging grass and soil at Tommyinnit like a fucking child, enthusiastically asking after Tubbo’s latest contraption, even talking to him some, drawing him into the conversation. The talking all flows easily, and Tommy, of course, flings dirt right back.

It’s funny. Makes Wilbur seem more approachable. Less like the untouchable leader and more like all the rest of them. Like—an older brother. Which he supposes makes sense.

They give it up eventually, of course. There's only so much obsidian one can place down before going completely mental. They return to L'Manberg as the sun starts to set, and Wilbur goes back off to his office, saying he has a few things to wrap up, but not before clapping Tommy on the shoulder and giving him and Tubbo a smile.

He doesn't return to their work on any of the following days. Jack wasn't really expecting him to. He's the president, after all. A very, very busy man. It was a little bit weird that he managed to make time to show up at all. But then, he supposes that even presidents can find time to hang out with their little brothers.

So, it was a little bit weird, but not much.

The weird thing happens about a week and a half in.

They're almost done. The field around them is solid black stone. Tommy keeps insisting that they expand a bit more, but even he seems to be slowing down. There's not much space left in the general vicinity.

And one afternoon, Jack looks up to find Eret there, standing literally inches away from him.

How she managed to approach without him noticing, he's got absolutely no idea. He won't admit that he jumps, but—he does, a jolt running through him, and then a shiver down his spine. He's not sure why that last thing happens, except—the moment he lays eyes on her, he can tell that something is *off*. Nothing obvious, nothing he can lay a finger on. But there's something wrong. Is it in her face? Her posture? That all seems normal. Except, she's not looking at him, but rather out over the obsidian field, toward the other edge. Where Tommy and Tubbo are.

Why do people only come by when he's by himself?

"Uh," he says, "hey, Eret."

"Hi, Jack," she says. Her voice is soft, distant. As usual, he can't catch a glimpse of her eyes behind her glasses, and she's holding herself very still, making her bearing oddly inscrutable. And it's true that Eret always seems to carry herself slightly stiffly—or, no, stiffly isn't quite the right word. With awareness, maybe, awareness of exactly who she is and what she's doing at any given time. There's a sort of regality to it, usually. Right now, it's just—*off*, and he still can't figure out quite why.

"Is there something you needed us for?" he asks, when it becomes evident that she's not going to say anything else.

For a long moment, she doesn't speak. Jack finds his eyes drifting across her uniform, her gold bracelets and earrings, the sword buckled to her waist. Her hands are clasped behind her back, her spine ramrod straight, and there's something unnatural about it. Something—but what?

"Is something the matter?" he tacks on, just in case. "Something you need help with?"

“Will this contain it?” she asks, and—what?

He doesn’t bother to prevent the confusion from crossing his face. “What?” he says.

Eret turns her head toward him, just slightly. Jack can feel the moment her gaze lands on him, because it’s like being dipped in static. Every single hair on his body stands on end. Which is not many hairs, but it’s the idea that counts, because holy shit, what the fuck—?

“It’s still sleeping,” Eret says. Is it just him, or is her voice echoing slightly, echoing where there are no walls, no obstructions for the sound to bounce off of? “It sleeps, but it will wake. And sooner, if we’re not careful. Even the strongest obsidian won’t be able to silence it forever. It will have its blood.”

He laughs, because there’s no other reasonable reaction to this. What the actual, ever-living *fuck*?

“What the hell are you on about?” he demands.

“I don’t know if we have time,” she says. “I don’t know. It all comes back to time. Too much and none at all.” Her gaze turns back to the obsidian, and suddenly Jack can breathe easier, a pressure releasing from his chest. A frown twists her face. “It isn’t—Jack.”

In that word, his name, the strangeness, stops all at once. The doubling is gone, the static dissipating, the uncanniness of her posture bleeding into something exhausted, something weary, something perhaps a little scared. But normal. Her hands come unclasped, one resting at her side and the other landing on the hilt of her sword, her fingers drumming nervously. And his heart—which he hadn’t even realized was thumping up a storm, trying to leap right out of his chest, but it *was*, like he was some sort of animal under the gaze of a predator—gradually returns to its normal rhythm.

“Yeah?” he says, and really, really hopes that the unsteadiness he feels doesn’t make it into his tone.

“I have no idea what I’m saying,” Eret says, and wow, that’s definitely concerning. Maybe even more concerning than the fact that she was saying it at all. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to—to frighten you.”

“Nah,” he says, “you didn’t scare me.” It’s a lie. He hopes she can’t tell. It’d just make her feel bad.

“Right,” Eret says, and chuckles a little. Nervous. Bewildered. She runs a hand through her hair, and for the first time, his eyes are drawn to a circlet that rests atop her head, nearly hidden under her locks. Gold, just like the rest of her jewelry. She’s really taken to wearing a lot of that, these days. But then, he supposes she is one of the richest people on the server at the moment, so she can afford to show off a little bit. “Right, I—don’t really know what I’m doing here, if I’m being completely honest with you. I just thought—I don’t know what I thought. Sorry again to worry you.”

“It’s seriously fine,” he says. “But really, though, Eret, are you—are you okay? Like, actually?”

She smiles, but it’s thin. Barely a smile at all.

“I’m not entirely sure myself,” she says. “I think I should—go. I think I ought to go.”

“Okay,” he says, “but if you need—”

“Jack,” she says, cutting him off. He shuts up. “Be careful here, alright? I don’t have—I don’t know. I don’t know what I know. But I think you should be careful. All three of you.”

“Well, that’s not ominous at all,” he quips, but she doesn’t so much as crack a grin. Which, after what she just said to him, shouldn’t surprise him. He doesn’t feel much like grinning either.

“Be careful,” she says again.

“We will,” he says. She turns her head, looks at him dead-on, and there’s none of that creeping, crawling sensation from before, none of the prickling across his skin and behind the bridge of his teeth. Just Eret, and the weight of her gaze is heavy, but heavy is all it is.

She nods at him. And then, she’s striding off. Back toward L’Manberg. He watches her go until he can’t see her anymore.

“What was that about?” Tubbo asks, literally right next to him, and holy *shit*, could people please stop *doing* that? He jumps, nearly out of his skin, and Tubbo eyes him curiously.

“I’m gonna level with you,” he replies. “I have absolutely no idea.”

“Alright then,” Tubbo says, with a shrug. It’s casual, though he, too, is now staring after where Eret left, something measuring in his eyes. “Tommy says we’ve got enough coverage. He wants us to dig deeper at the edges and place some going down, kind of like a big box. But after that, we’re pretty much done.”

Kind of like a big box. A big—but boxes are for putting things in.

Eret’s words ring in his mind, and he stiffens. It’s a coincidence, but—that whole thing was so weird, both to him and apparently to Eret herself, and he can’t bring himself to dismiss it.

“Tubbo,” he says slowly, “are we containing something?”

Tubbo blinks. And then, as one, he and Tubbo both turn to look at Tommy, still over on the other edge of the field. As they watch, Punz appears out of practically nowhere—probably pearling, since Punz is kind of a show-off bastard—and they quickly enter some kind of conversation. Not a particularly hostile one, it seems; Punz isn’t drawing weapons, and Tommy seems remarkably relaxed around him. So he and Tubbo just watch.

Supposedly, this is the fallout of their prank. Somehow, he’s not at all interested in it.

“What would we be containing?” Tubbo asks.

“No clue,” he answers. “I dunno if I want to think about it.”

But he can’t help but think about it anyway. Can’t help but wonder if the obsidian isn’t some kind of prank after all, but rather a cage. For what, he doesn’t know—it would have to be something deep within the earth, perhaps in a cave or some other hollowed out place. Or maybe just in the dirt, surrounded on all sides by the world pressing in.

It’s still sleeping, Eret’s voice says, and he shudders.

Tommy talks to Punz. He and Tubbo look on, too far to make out any words being said but not wanting to get closer. And not for the first time, he wonders if there’s something that Tommy isn’t telling him. Either of them.

He’s never lost sleep over the idea before. But, *It’s still sleeping*, Eret’s voice says, and he thinks that he’ll be losing sleep tonight.

Chapter End Notes

Angst? In my fic? I think not. Only everybody messing around and crimeboys being brothers and Wilbur joining in on shenanigans and Jack Manifold being included in things.

shoves the thing with Eret under the table Yep, nothing else going on here!!

[My tumblr!](#)

Next up, Chapter Twelve: In which Niki tries to make herself an easy person to talk to, and this has both benefits and drawbacks.

Niki II

Chapter Notes

Hello I am back :D

I didn't have any time to respond to comments this time around, but thank you for them! I know I say it a lot, but it really does mean a whole lot to me <3

Continuing the trend of not needing additional content warnings, I believe, except for a very minor instance of violence, and the usual implications of things going on in the background.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Niki doesn't think she's belonged anywhere quite as much as she belongs in L'Manberg.

She's lived in great places. In villages she's liked a great deal, with people she got along with, with friends that she made and loved and who loved her in return. She's never lacked a sense of community, of inclusion. But L'Manberg is different, and perhaps she knew all along that it would be. Perhaps that's why she dropped her entire life and came running as soon as her old friend's letter arrived in the mail. Perhaps she could trace the hope and care in his very handwriting.

She didn't know that this was what she wanted until she came. Until she stepped through the gates to find a little nation flourishing. Until she met the people here, all united under one cause, one banner, one shared joy and passion, and realized that she wanted to be part of it. Wanted to have what they had. Wanted to be one of them, and not just because of old bonds, but because of the potential for new ones, strong as any friendship she's ever formed.

She's found not just inclusion here, but kinship. Not just community, not just belonging, but *home*, and something in her heart has settled, something that she didn't even realize was discontent, was searching for something. And every day makes it more and more apparent that any troubles that come along with the move are more than worth it. It's in every time Fundy beams at her, tail swishing, or every time Eret stops by for a pastry and a chat, or every time Tubbo comes to bounce a new idea off of her, looking for advice and suggestions, or every time Tommy pretends to steal her baking supplies, even though they both know she'll gladly give him what she has in stock.

It's in long nights sewing a flag, making sure every stitch and thread was just right, and seeing Wilbur's unfiltered delight as she raised it early one morning, set it to flapping against the sunrise, greeting the new day and the new future.

What they have here is more than great; it's *good*, and it's kind, and it's special, and now that she's here, she can't fathom being anywhere else.

And it seems that the other members of the SMP feel the same, or at least in part, because the moment that her bakery is open for business, it becomes a staple. Visited by everyone, whether they're members of L'Manberg or not. She feeds them all just the same, and with every passing day, her pride in herself and in this nation grows, because she truly feels like she's part of something, like she's making the world and her friends' lives better.

Not that it's never contentious. She's still angry with Sapnap, angry enough that he hasn't shown his face here in a while. There have been arguments, spats. She even had Dream in here once, pretty clearly scouting the place out, though she likes to think she handled it well enough. He left with bread in his hands and a lack of open hostility in his voice, so she'll count it a success.

But on the whole, it's been good. Been peaceful. Been happy. And she knows everyone's typical order by heart.

So she slides George's bag across the counter: a loaf of white bread, an iced donut, six chocolate chip cookies, and a bagel. She's not quite sure yet what out of all of this George eats and what goes to his friends. She likes to imagine Dream getting donut icing smeared on his mask.

"Thanks," George says, and manages to infuse even that one word with his typical indolence. And yet, he appears slightly on edge, shifting his weight back and forth between his feet in a subtle kind of way. She only notices because she's had time to figure out how George normally is when he's relaxed, when there's nothing more pressing than getting some baked goods back to his cohorts. George is not usually one for urgency, no matter how small.

And so—

"Is everything alright?" she asks. She doesn't consider herself close with George. He's not a part of L'Manberg, actively fought against them while they were still at war with Dream—not that she was there for that, but she's heard the stories from Tubbo, Fundy, Wilbur. And Wilbur's not pleased that she lets George frequent her establishment at all, that she lets people from outside of their country come, but the moment he brought that up, she told him in no uncertain terms that she is going to serve whoever she pleases. And Wilbur let it go, because he knows better than to cross her boundaries when she sets them down.

Though she knows he's still not pleased. It's something he'll have to deal with. She knows how to tell him off when he's being an asshole.

"Yeah," George says, offering a half shrug. "Everything's fine. Dream is being sort of weird again, but he does that every now and then. It's fine."

"Oh?" she says, leaning forward, hoping she's conveying the right amount of interest. "Weird how?"

"I dunno?" George says, and the slightest bit of frustration leaks into his voice. "Just, sort of going on about the discs again, and things we ought to be planning for. Which is stupid, since he has the discs, and we're not at war anymore, so I dunno what he thinks we're supposed to be doing. He's just being an idiot."

“Well, good luck with him, then,” she says, and George scoffs.

“Thanks,” he says, far more sardonic than the first time. “I’ll probably need it.”

And that’s the extent of it, but she turns his words over in her head for a long time afterward. It’s probably nothing. The way George presented it made it seem like nothing. But then, George is close friends with Dream. George has nothing to fear from Dream. And while Dream has been amicable to her personally, she knows the history of her nation. She knows that Dream fought tooth and nail to keep them from forming this country, and that he only gave up when Tommy gave away the music discs they’d spent so much time clashing over.

So it’s probably nothing, but if George thinks that Dream is acting weird about the music discs, there might be something to it. Something that may not bode particularly well for them, that may herald the start of something bigger.

Or that may mean nothing at all.

Still, she decides to tell Wilbur about it. She goes up to his office the next day at lunch, a basket of freshly made sandwiches tucked under her arm. It’s a little difficult, these days, to coax him away from his work before nightfall, but that’s never stopped her from trying. And she likes to think he appreciates the thought.

She knocks, but doesn’t wait for Wilbur to tell her to enter, so she thinks she catches him by surprise. At any rate, when she opens the door, Wilbur is in the process of jerking himself fully upright, a spasm of his hands sending several pens clattering across his desk from a stacked position. She stops in the doorway, lifting an eyebrow and grinning.

“Being productive today, Mr. President?” she says.

“I’m always productive,” Wilbur says. “That’s me. Productive all the time.”

“Okay,” she says, and steps forward, and plops the basket on his desk, on top of all his paperwork. “How about you productively eat a sandwich, then?”

His eyes widen a little as he looks at the basket’s contents. And then one hand shoots out and grabs a sandwich, shoving it toward his mouth.

“Don’t mind if I do,” he says, as soon as he’s swallowed. “Thank you.” And then, he pauses, cocking his head. “Niki!” he exclaims, like he’s only just seen her, and she can’t help but feel endeared. “Hi! Sorry, I didn’t greet you properly. Good to see you!”

She smiles at him. “It’s good to see you too, Wil. Keep eating your sandwich.”

The way he’s chowing down in it gives her the sneaking suspicion that he hasn’t yet eaten today. She would ask him about it, but she’s not entirely sure that he would tell her the truth. Wil has always hated to make people worry about him, and he knows full well that she’d disapprove of him skipping meals.

“Did you need me for something?” Wilbur asks between bites.

“I wanted to make sure you were fed,” she says, “and that you were taking enough breaks. And I also wanted to tell you about something George told me the other day.”

Something flickers across Wilbur’s face. Something a bit dark, irritated. An emotion she can’t share in when it comes to George, but she wasn’t here for the war. She’s never had to view George as her enemy. Wilbur has.

Suddenly, she wonders whether telling him is the right thing to do. In all likelihood, nothing will come of it; Dream is, by all accounts, rather mercurial, prone to moods, to extremes of emotion. If he’s being, as George puts it, weird about the discs, it probably doesn’t mean much of anything. And now that she’s here, watching Wilbur devour a sandwich like he hasn’t eaten in days, trying to figure out if the bags under his eyes are darker than they were before, she can’t help but feel like maybe Wilbur’s dealing with enough at the moment. That telling him this will send him chasing after rumors and stories and nothing of substance—and that, she knows, will stress him out to no end. Wilbur never likes unexplored potentialities, and he doesn’t like being unprepared. Even if the preparation turns out to be for something that will never come.

“Something George told you?” Wilbur asks, and he’s all seriousness. Presidential. Concerned for his country.

No, she’ll tell him. If only because to back out at this point would require a lie, and she doesn’t make a habit of lying to her friends.

“It wasn’t much,” she says. “But he said that he thought Dream was being weird. Sort of going on about the discs. Maybe planning something, but I’m not really sure. George seemed a little bit irritated with him.”

The moment she mentions the discs, he flinches, and she’s fairly sure she knows why. That’s another part of the story she wasn’t here for, but she knows it well. Knows how important the discs were to Tommy, because Wilbur made sure to emphasize that. How important they were, and thus, how big the sacrifice.

Wilbur’s never said it out loud, but she knows he feels guilty about it. Guilty that it was Tommy who won their independence, that it was Tommy who had to give something up. That he couldn’t do it himself. Niki knows how to read him well, and that means she knows his tendencies to take on all the responsibility he can manage. Even when it’s not entirely practical. Even when it’s not something that’s his fault.

But that’s Wilbur. He cares deeply, wholeheartedly, even when it’s sometimes to his own detriment.

“Did he now,” Wilbur says. He sounds considering. Careful. And not particularly happy. “Well, thank you for telling me.”

There’s already planning happening behind his eyes. Contingencies being stacked.

“Of course,” she says, and hesitates. “I’m sure it’s probably not a big deal.”

“Probably not,” Wilbur agrees, smiling a smile that doesn’t quite reach the rest of his face, and she can’t tell whether he actually means it or not. “There’s no need to worry, in any case. Diplomatic relations are good, and if something comes up, I’ll handle it.”

“I know you will,” she says. “I believe in you.”

“I’ll keep us safe,” he answers, and it sounds like a promise.

Nothing comes of it in the next few weeks. There’s no whisper of any sort of threat, and she lets herself relax. People keep coming to the bakery, George among them. Tommy and Tubbo and Jack finish up that prank of theirs, and nothing seems to come of that, either; at the very least, Punz doesn’t kill anyone or show up demanding retribution, so it’s probably alright.

And everything is good.

Everything is good.

Everything is—

The thing is, it is good. It is. And she loves it here, loves everything, loves everyone. But she’s not naive. She’s not oblivious. And she’s put herself at the center of life here, has opened her arms and her furnaces to everyone, so she’s able to spot where some of the problems are. Fundy, for instance, has no idea how to approach Wilbur after the election debacle, and she can’t blame him for that—at times, she’s still annoyed herself that he would dare do such a stupid thing, and without even telling her about it when they were supposed to be partners. But Fundy needs a friend, needs someone in his corner while his relationship with Wil is so strained, so she can be that person.

And then, there’s the fact that Eret shows up sometimes, dazed and confused and not making much sense, apparently even to himself. It happens more and more frequently, and they appear more and more stressed every time she sees them, and there’s the time when they confess that they feel like they’re being watched all the time, in a hushed, thin sort of voice, and she doesn’t know what to do other than wrap her arms around them and let them shake for a little while before putting themselves back together again.

And then, there’s her growing certainty that Wil isn’t sleeping or eating enough, despite her best efforts. And then, there’s the tightness that sometimes makes itself apparent in Tubbo’s eyes, and the way that Jack sometimes seems uncertain of his place, and the expressions that will sometimes come across Tommy’s face when he thinks nobody is looking at him.

Wilbur announces that they’re going to have a festival.

He makes a bit of a show of it—but that’s not surprising. Wilbur’s always been a showman. He calls for an assembly, and once he’s got everyone gathered under his platform, looking up

at where he stands behind his podium, he explains his plans. A festival, he says, to celebrate the success of L'Manberg and their good relations with their friends and neighbors in the Dream SMP. A festival of togetherness, to look to a bright and happy future.

To his side, Tommyinnit, the Vice President of L'Manberg, stands with a smile on his face.

She gets a little caught up in the anticipation, after that. Everyone's always happy to have a party, so the announcement is met with a good bit of excitement. She's always happy to have a party too. She's already planning out all the things she'll make, and how many, and how much time she'll need to properly prepare. Maybe she can help with the decorations, too; she likes to think she has a good eye for things like that. She's fond of flowers, though many are out of season at the moment.

Wilbur finds her later, after he's done with his official speech. His shoulders are slumping just a little bit; he always looks more tired when he's not on the stage. She supposes that he's in his natural element when he's up there, that the thrill of performance keeps the exhaustion at bay. Because he is exhausted, that much is clear to her, though she doubts he means to show it.

"Niki," he says, "I was hoping to ask—"

"Consider it done," she says, because she already knows what he's going for. "I can handle refreshments."

He smiles at her. Definitely weary. But genuine.

"Thank you," he says, and pauses. Glances around, surveying the area. Everyone's still here, now just chatting, hanging around. It feels like a community. There's an undercurrent of eagerness in the air. "This is what we need, I think. Something to boost our morale, and hopefully avoid any problems with Dream and his lot." He tilts his head. "Dream's not an unreasonable man, after all. He can be talked to. There's no need for further conflict."

"I think it's a great idea," she tells him, and he nods, decisively.

"It's our best move," he says, very seriously, and then, something in his posture relaxes. "And besides, who can resist a good party?"

"Definitely not me," she says, and it's the right answer, because it makes him smile.

It's a little bit later that her good mood comes crashing down, because it's a little bit later that she realizes that Tommy isn't anywhere to be found. He's not pestering Eret, not needling Jack, not standing by Tubbo's side with an arm around his shoulders, not following Wilbur. And that's odd, because something like this should be exactly Tommy's scene, so—

She goes to find him.

She manages that pretty easily. He's in the area behind the stage, facing the wall, leaning against it, his forearm and fist resting on the wood just above his head. He's still. Breathing slowly and deeply. And she draws up short, wondering if this is something she should

interrupt, because somehow, Tommy in this moment doesn't seem to her very much like Tommy at all.

But she doesn't want to leave him here alone, not if something's wrong. So she takes another tentative step forward.

"Tommy?" she asks softly.

Tommy jerks, stumbling back from the wall as if it's just delivered him a roundhouse punch, whirling to face her with a lurching motion. His eyes are wide, so much so that she can see the whites at the top and bottom, and his face is slightly flushed. He is trembling, she realizes, and it reminds her not so much of fear as something restrained, leashed, straining to be free, some terrible thing trying to claw its way from him and into the open air.

"Niki!" he says, and he's trying too hard to sound normal. "Fuck, I didn't—how long have you been standing there?" He finishes with a laugh. Artificial. It unnerves her. Tommy is odd, sometimes, but never artificial. He wears his heart on his sleeve, even if the threads of his emotions don't always make sense to her.

"I only just got here," she says, and takes another step forward. "You weren't out with everyone else. I was just wondering where you were."

"Ah," Tommy says. "Well, you see, I was thinking about my many wives, and I was simply overwhelmed for a moment. Had to take a minute to myself." He arches a brow, grins at her.

"Tommy," she says, "I would be really surprised to hear that you had even one wife."

Tommy's jaw drops. "What the fuck," he says. "You think I can't have a wife? You think I can't get so much—"

"I really, really don't want to hear the next word out of your mouth," she says.

"Why not? It wasn't going to be anything *bad*, who do you think I—"

"Is something the matter, Tommy?" she says, cutting him off. His mouth clicks shut, and he looks at her. Just looks. And she continues, though she has the sense that Tommy very, very much would rather she not. Something about the way he's just tried to deflect her, the way his feet are shifting, scuffing against the ground. "It's only that I figured you'd be out there with everyone else." She pauses, and takes a shot in the dark. "Did something Wilbur said upset you? Or is it something about the festival?"

At the word, his face twists, lips slanting to the side, scowl almost like a bleeding wound, eyebrows drawing together. And then, he seems to realize what he's doing, because the expression lifts a bit, but it's obviously a struggle, obviously not natural, and once again, that word comes to her mind. Artificial. Since when does Tommy hide what he's feeling? If Tommy is upset, why isn't he out there making his grievances known, instead of here, alone, trying to divert her, to disguise what he's feeling?

"No," he says, "the festival is fine."

“Okay,” she says. “I don’t want to be pushy, but I’m getting the feeling that there’s something about it that’s not fine.”

“Well, it is,” Tommy says, almost snaps. “It’s fine, so just, how about you leave it alone? Look, we’ll go and talk to everyone else now, yeah? We’ll go, and, and it’s fine, it’s fucking fine.” And he walks toward her, and then brushes past her, and the way he’s walking is more like a march than anything else, the gait of someone pushing toward an unpleasant task. Or perhaps it’s a soldier’s stride. Both. Tommy has, after all, been a soldier. Sometimes she thinks about it and wants to cry, because really, they’re all too young. The kids are too young to be fighting, and even Wilbur is too young to have the weight of a nation on his shoulders—because no matter how few citizens there actually are, no matter how few players are on this SMP, the eyes of worlds are upon them, upon this server, Dream’s fame and the tumultuous atmosphere drawing curiosity like phantoms to the sleep-deprived.

But it’s alright now. Or it should be. The war is over, the elections are over. And everything is good, and she bakes cookies in the hopes of healing wounds with them.

Except Tommy is bothered. And anything that can bother Tommy in earnest is worrying.

“Tommy,” she says, and reaches out, and—

He slaps her hand away. Not hard, only just enough to sting slightly, but it stuns her, roots her to the spot. And Tommy stares at her, hand still half-raised. The whites of his eyes are visible again, and he looks a bit like an animal, she thinks. A young one. A cow, realizing that it’s being led to slaughter, except that can’t be right, because there is no slaughter here, no danger.

“Don’t touch me,” he says, words spat out rapid-fire. “Don’t fucking touch me, don’t—”

He breaks off. Still staring. Breaths coming in short bursts. And she stares too, and every inch of her cries out to go to him, to try to learn what’s wrong, to wrap her arms around him until whatever he feels threatened by goes away, but she can’t, because he told her not to. And because she’s beginning to think that in this moment, what he feels threatened by is *her*.

“Okay,” she whispers. “I won’t. I’m sorry, I should have asked.” He’s still staring. Is he even seeing her? “I’m sorry. But, Tommy, please, could you tell me what’s wrong? So I can help?”

Tommy scoffs, and she’s never been more relieved to hear the sound. Never been more relieved to know that he’s hearing her, that he hasn’t gone—somewhere else.

“Help,” he mutters, and he’s angry, and she doesn’t know why, so all she can do is stand there. She’s never felt more useless. “Help, you’re so—why do you have to be so—fuck. Fuck. You’re just. You need to just, to just fuck off, alright? I don’t need your help. You don’t—you act all concerned, but I know—you don’t really—it’s fucking fine, and I don’t fucking—I’m handling it, alright? The festival’s gonna be just fine, and nothing shit’s gonna happen, and I’ll fucking make sure of it. Pogchamps all around. I don’t need you trying to—”

He cuts himself off again. She has to gather herself before speaking, has to wade past the dismay and hurt that Tommy’s tone sets welling up in her.

“What don’t I need to do, Tommy?” she asks, a waver creeping into her voice. She didn’t mean to let that happen.

“Pretend to fucking *care*,” Tommy snaps—and it really is a snap, this time, all sharp edges, biting and bitter. And it hits her harder than any physical blow could have.

“I do care,” she says, still reeling. She doesn’t—she doesn’t *understand*, and she doesn’t know what to do to fix it, and she must have done something wrong, somehow, but she doesn’t know where, doesn’t know when, and Tommy’s not one to let grievances fester quietly, so she doesn’t have a clue where to start, and—

Suddenly, Tommy’s expression changes. Falls into something more open, something a bit shocked.

“Fuck,” he says, “I—” He takes a step back, and then another, mouth working, one hand coming up to run through his hair. “Wait, I, I didn’t mean—fuck. No, I, I know, Niki, I know, I, I didn’t mean to—”

“Then what did you mean?” she asks, and maybe she shouldn’t. But her chest is tight and her face is flushed, and she doesn’t know it’s anger or fear or directionless guilt that she’s feeling, or maybe all of the above. Is there a single word to describe the impression of stumbling into landmines she didn’t know were there?

“Nothing, it’s, that’s, it shouldn’t have, I shouldn’t have directed that at you, it wasn’t, it wasn’t really, meant for—it wasn’t meant for you, or not, not you you but, I mean, fuck. No. I’m.” He sucks in a breath. Takes another step back. It’s guilt on his face, now, and she wishes she knew what to do with it. “I’m sorry, Niki. That wasn’t—that wasn’t right of me. I shouldn’t have said that to you. I know that—I know you care.”

“Okay,” she says, and wishes she could get her voice to rise above a whisper.

Tommy flinches.

“I do,” he insists, “it’s just, alright, so I might be a little bit stressed, and maybe I don’t really like the idea of the festival, and maybe Wilbur wouldn’t fucking listen to me when I told him that it’s gonna, it’s gonna fucking go wrong and I don’t want—I think that it’s a bad idea, but it’s, look. I’m, I’m dealing with it, and you don’t have to worry about it, because I’m already feeling better, yeah? So I just—I was just feeling upset, and I didn’t mean to be upset with you, and there’s not anything you’ve got to worry about, because everything’s poggers.”

He’s lying to her.

“Can I do anything?” she asks. “Anything, I can—I can talk to Wilbur for you. I could see—”

But what could she see? Wilbur’s decided on his course of action, and he’s not going to take it back. Not when he’s got the whole country and beyond excited for it now, excited for a festival, for a celebration. And even if he hadn’t, it’s always been hard to dissuade Wilbur from an action once he decides on it. He’s a stubborn man.

“No,” Tommy says. “Don’t talk to Wilbur. We never—we never even had this conversation, you and me, we never—this didn’t happen. Nothing happened. Just, just fucking forget about it, would you? Pretend we didn’t—pretend we talked about beautiful women instead, or, or something. Look, I’ll even start. I personally think that every woman is beautiful, except for the ones who shout at me because that is rude and rather not on of them, and I do not stand to be shouted at, so if a woman shouts at me I simply stab her with a knife—”

She lets him talk for a moment, not really paying attention to his words. He trails off after a minute, regarding her slightly warily, like he’s expecting some sort of response but isn’t sure what she’s going to give him.

So she answers him.

“What do you think is going to go wrong, Tommy?” she asks. Still quiet. If she talks any louder, she thinks the air itself might break.

His expression closes like a book shutting, a door slamming, an old favorite glass falling to the floor in slow motion.

“Nothing’s going to go wrong,” he says, flat and dull. “Nothing. Don’t worry about it. See you around, Niki.”

He turns away from her, passes through the long shadows that the stage casts upon the ground, and then is gone. And in the split second before he turns the corner, she almost imagines she sees someone else in his bearing. Someone weary, someone hunted, someone holding onto their composure by slipping fingertips. And the fall below him is vast, unending.

She blinks.

But he’s not in sight. There’s no chance for a second glance. No chance to dispel the image, to dispel Tommy on a cliff’s edge, straight-backed and tired and resigned, to dispel the idea that she’s just lost her opportunity to catch him.

Though she ought to follow, perhaps, ought to push him more for answers, ought to try harder to help him, her feet remain where they are, no muscle budging.

She can still hear everyone else. She’s not too far away. And she can hear it when Tommy’s voice joins them, bright and loud and upbeat. Nothing to indicate—

Nothing to indicate that anything just happened at all.

She loves this country. She loves these people. She loves her bakery and her life and the songs on the air, the new songs, the songs that tell of a special place and a freedom unending and a universe that cares, songs that can only be born from a history and a togetherness and an abiding adoration. She loves, so very deeply, and she would not give it up for anything, and it’s all so very good.

But she’s beginning to worry.

There is something wrong in L'Manberg.

Chapter End Notes

Me, writing the first few paragraphs of this chapter: I think I shall make it obvious that I fucking love L'Manberg

Also haha hello inniters, y'all have had it too easy these past couple of chapters, I decided :)

[My tumblr!](#)

Next up, Chapter Thirteen: In which Eret never seems to be able to find the answers he's looking for, even as the questions continue to pile up. And not every onlooker is friendly, and not every meeting expected.

Eret II

Chapter Notes

Someday I will have enough time to answer comments again. But until then, I love y'all so much, really. Your responses to this fic give me so much joy <3

Content warnings this chapter for unreality, blood, character death, body horror, and potentially some general horror elements.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It starts to happen when he's awake.

He thinks. He's having difficulty telling, these days, which is terrifying enough in itself.

It begins gradually, and at first he thinks he's just nodding off. It would make sense if he were; he's been tired, his sleep troubled, even if he can't remember the dreams that plague him, can't remember why he wakes up so uneasy, or sometimes desperately sad, or just desperate. So, sometimes he'll be sitting somewhere, and in the next moment, he's—not, is somewhere else, and then he'll come back to himself knowing that something just transpired, that he saw something, experienced something other than the present moment, but the details always, *always* escape him.

And Eret figures he's falling asleep. That his brain is stressed enough, exhausted enough to make him take brief naps whenever his body is relaxed. And it's frustrating, perhaps, and certainly concerning, but it's not as if he's not trying to rest, and it's not as if he can do anything about nightmares. So he'll do what he can to not exert himself, to take care. Other than that, he carries on.

But then, he starts losing time. When he's walking, when he's building, in the middle of any activity at all. And he always knows, too, knows when he's been—*elsewhere* is the only word he can think of to describe it, because he's certainly not present, even if he can never recall what he sees in that state. If he sees anything. But he must—he wouldn't return to awareness feeling the way he does if he saw nothing at all. If he was just sleeping.

The first time he falls from one of his towers, he goes to get help.

It's not a bad fall. He's not at the very top. He comes to with the wind knocked out of his lungs, lights flashing behind his eyes, his skin sore and bruised where the impact must have been made, but he doesn't break a bone, doesn't take a head injury, doesn't lose a life. It could have been far, far worse. And that is the realization that leads him to seek someone out, because to allow it to become worse would be irresponsible.

There's nothing to do about bad dreams. Everyone has them. But if he's blacking out, or something of the kind—surely, there must be something he can do about that?

“Blacking out?” Ponk repeats, eyebrows lifting.

He nods.

“Maybe not precisely that, but—” He pauses, and then continues. “I’m losing time, for sure. I don’t have a better way to put that. I think I’m having nightmares when it happens, but I can’t remember them. I just wake up feeling—variations of bad.”

“Huh,” Ponk says, seeming to mull on that. “Okay, I won’t lie to you, Eret, I’m more of a broken bones and bandages sort of doctor. I’m not really sure what to do about that. I think I might have some sort of sleep medication, if you want it. You said you haven’t been sleeping well?”

“Right,” he says.

“Because of nightmares?”

“Yes. As near as I can tell.”

They hum. “Yeah, that sucks. I still don’t know if this will help, but maybe taking meds will let you sleep without the dreams. And then maybe you can get some actual, real sleep, and you’ll stop blacking out when you’re awake.” They go rummaging in a cabinet, coming up a few minutes later with a potion. “It’s basically diluted weakness, but it might do the trick. Obviously be responsible with it, alright? I don’t want you in here because you’ve overdosed on potions.”

“I know how to be responsible,” he agrees, accepting the vial. The liquid sloshes slightly.

“Yeah, I mean, I wouldn’t be giving drugs to just anyone on this server. No one has any good sense in these parts,” Ponk says. “Unless they gave me a lot of money. That would be different. You only owe me the regular amount of money, though, since you’re a valued and responsible patient.” They hold out a hand expectantly, and Eret drops a couple of diamonds into it.

“Thank you for this,” he says, and Ponk shrugs.

“Of course,” they say. “That’s my job around here. You try and get some good sleep, alright? And if that doesn’t help, just come back to me and we’ll try something else.”

“I’ll do that,” he says. “See you around, Ponk.”

Ponk nods at him, eyes crinkling in a way that suggests a grin beneath their mask. He nods back, and then he steps out of their office, beginning the walk back home. It’s not far; nothing is particularly far from anything else on this server, at the moment, and one never goes long without running into somebody. For some reason, that thought makes his chest clench up, though the sensation abates after only a few seconds.

And then, suddenly, his foot fails to find purchase on the ground. He stumbles, rights himself, but his heart stutters, and stars wheel overhead, red tinged and dancing in unfamiliar patterns, constellations he doesn't recognize, and it's the middle of the day and this shouldn't be, but it is and he tries to take another step forward and he's—

—in a desert, and he is cold.

“Wait here,” he hears himself say, to people that he cannot see. “It's too quiet.”

The stars dip around him. They are whispering. *Danger, danger, danger.* They're blinking at him, swarming, and yet they don't dare to get too close. There is danger here, and though they tell him of it, there is wariness in them. He is part of it. He is part of the danger, and the stars are afraid of him.

Or perhaps it's this place.

There is sand, but the air is crisp, biting, hollow. Snow falls from the sky above, swirling like ash. There is a sign, glowing, neon and too bright to his eyes, colors trailing through the air like smears of watercolor paint, fuzzy and indistinct. There is a sign, and he can't read it, and it looks half finished, like it will never be finished. He trudges up to it and past it, each step an effort. There is something wrong with his balance. He's dizzy, lightheaded, *freezing*, and distantly, the thought occurs to him that these are all symptoms of bloodloss. But he can't feel a wound. He doesn't know what's wrong.

He glances back. There are two figures. One tall, the other not. He doesn't know who they are. Can't see them.

He turns again, takes a step forward. Buildings ahead, and they're drawing him in, the slow suck of an empty place trying desperately to fill itself. He takes another step, stumbles down the slope, and he doesn't take too many more but somehow, he's in the plaza, surrounded by towering structures with nothing inside of them, open skeletons that never got the chance to be more, that never had anything to occupy their ribcages. They're corpses, husks, and that's all they ever were and ever will be, and the lights are all still shining but they are weak, powerless, ineffectual. He can barely get a breath in.

This place feels wrong. Wrong in the same way that false gold is wrong, all glitter and no substance or strength. It's the wrongness of a performer's wide smile, of flames that summon the dark rather than driving it back, of unfulfilled promises. It's wrong, and it is unfinished, the buildings empty shells, and his bones tell him that it will never be complete, that there will be no life here, that anything that could have been has been choked from it, wrung dry, and the fountain is full of dust.

He doesn't want to be here, he thinks. But his body continues to move, continues to step forward, and he does not have a choice in the matter. This will play out. He has no command. No command, and no understanding.

He picks his way across the ground. Carefully. There are red vines everywhere, and he doesn't know the reason for the dread they fill him with, the wrongness that buzzes in his

teeth when he looks at them for too long, but he does not want to touch them. And so he does not.

He feels like an intruder.

The red vines cover this soulless, silent place. And the red vines cover the body.

It wears a dress shirt. Suspenders. Its face is twisted into a snarl, and its eyes are wide open. Its—*his* eyes. His eyes, Eret knows, somehow, and yet, his face slips away from him, the features gone as soon as he blinks. His mind won't hold onto them, won't hold onto this, and yet, something in his chest is bitter and mournful, and wishing for something that might once have been but never came to fulfillment. Wishing for better, happier days.

And he still doesn't understand.

But he reaches out and closes the body's eyes. There are too many wounds to pretend that he is sleeping.

"I'm so sorry," he hears himself say, and doesn't know who he is addressing.

He straightens, turns, and—

—is kneeling on the Prime Path, and it's gone. Just like it always is. The details fade like sand gripped too hard, slipping through curled, white-knuckled fingers. His fingers are digging into the wood. He thinks he's given himself a few splinters.

"Fuck," he says, softly.

He looks up at the sky. The sun's barely moved. Not too long, then. There is a gaping emptiness in his chest, as there so often is after this happens. He's seeing something. He knows he's seeing something, and that it's important, and that he needs to remember, but his head refuses to let him do it. It's like grasping fog, holding smoke. Hazy, and then gone.

The potion is lying next to him. Intact, thankfully. He gets to his feet, slowly, picking it up as he goes.

His chest is sore, and his hands are trembling. And for a moment, just a moment, he thinks he sees, dancing at the edge of his fingertips—

Stars. Stars, and void, and a glitching distortion. He thinks that should scare him, but instead, he just watches curiously as the effect fades away, until he starts to feel something approaching normal again. Normal being relative, of course.

He downs the potion that night. He thinks he sleeps well.

It doesn't seem to help.

They wish there was a warning. They wish there was a warning other than a slight unsettling sensation in their gut and on their neck and at their fingertips, a prickling in their eyes the moment before it comes about, because if there was a warning, they'd be able to handle it better. If there was a warning, they could at least make sure that they're in a safe place, and that no one is around to risk being scared or hurt or—

They're with Fundy. They're watching a movie. Fundy isn't speaking much for reasons that he hasn't disclosed, but they're fairly certain that it's something to do with his strained relationship with Wilbur, which is an issue that they're not sure where to begin to solve. So they try to be there for the both of them, for Fundy when he needs company and for Wilbur whenever he'll let someone get close.

They're with Fundy. They're watching a movie. Fundy's gradually become more relaxed, his ears swiveled forward rather than lying flat.

And they hear, for a moment, the stars. It is never a particularly pleasant sound. The stars are not fond of them, or perhaps simply of what they are. What they come from. Eret scarcely knows that himself, but they have an idea. That's a secret they keep under lock and key.

They jerk upright. Fundy looks at them.

"Are you good?" Fundy asks, and—

—they're kneeling in a grassy plain stained with blood. The sky is dark, almost green, clouds churning tumultuously, casting the ground with an eerie glow. There is a hot, humid wind, snarling and biting and tearing at their clothes, and it tastes of smoke and iron.

They have no idea where they are until they see it in the distance. The structure is choked with red vines, but they know it. Fundy's house. It looks decrepit, abandoned, dark.

But their gaze is drawn to the scene in front of them.

It blurs and twists with every second, difficult to make out, to focus on, though they strain to resolve their cloudy vision. But they can tell this much: there is a man on the ground, and a second figure crouching beside him. This second figure—not human, they think; perhaps a piglin or a hybrid of some kind—has one hand grasping one of the man's, and the other grasping a sword. The sword has been driven through the man's chest.

The man is not breathing.

There is something spread out behind the man. It is in the shape of wings, but it cannot be. Wings do not look like that. Wings are not more bone than feather. Wings do not have red vines sprouting from them, weaving through flesh and sinew, covered in still-flowing blood.

There is someone next to them, and just behind. Someone standing.

"Why?" they—*he*, they know this voice, they know it, they *know* it—choke out. "You didn't—you didn't have to—"

The piglin—maybe, probably—speaks.

“Get him out of here,” they—no, *he*, he again—say, and there is nothing at all in his voice. No emotion. Not a waver.

Eret’s lungs struggle to inhale. The emotion they feel is more than they should; they don’t know who these people are, what is happening, but then, they never do, do they? Distantly, they know they never do, and yet, they always do, and the stars whisper—admonishments. Something else whispers an admonishment. The void is too close, and they are the only one who notices. And yet, they do not, because the void is not here, is not in this moment at all, and past mixes with the present mixes with the future and they still do not understand.

“What?” the first voice says, wrecked and hysterical. “No, no, like *fuck*, what the fuck—”

“Are you sure?” they hear themselves say.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything,” the piglin says.

“Fuck you,” says the first, the one beside them. They cannot look. They are not allowed. Because they didn’t, when this happened. “*Fuck* you.”

“He was already gone,” the piglin says. “Just like the rest of them. And he knew it.”

His voice is monotone. Eret is fairly certain that on the inside, he is screaming.

“He wouldn’t want you to do this,” they say, without intending to.

“He’s gone,” the piglin repeats. “So tell me, what does it matter?”

They pull themselves up to their feet. Grasp the hand of someone to their left. Do not let go, even when he tries to yank away.

“It was an honor to know you,” they say.

“I wish I could say the same,” the piglin says.

“No,” says the first. “No, no, no, no—”

“Any suggestions?” they ask.

The piglin shrugs. He is still holding the man’s hand. “There was a kid,” he says softly. “I think they thought I didn’t know. I was waitin’ for him to tell me. Too late now. But you should go get the kid.” He raises his head. Eret cannot see what his eyes look like, even though they are staring right into them. “But just get him out of here, would you? Someone’s gotta survive this.”

It is the voice of someone who has resolved himself. It is a voice empty and cold, brooking no arguments. It is the voice of a warrior who intends to fight one last battle. It is a voice of blood. It is the voice of someone who has nothing left to lose, or who has decided that he does not. And though the piglin has not yet drawn his sword from the man’s chest, they that

once they leave, he will. He will stand, and he will take up his weapon, his head held high, and he will go to his death, and he will do so willingly.

“I’ve failed almost everyone else,” they hear themselves say. Quietly, aching. “I won’t fail those who are left.”

And the world fractures. The scene fades. The stars swoop in, not to hold them, not to keep them safe, but to conceal, to be rid of the intrusion upon the fabric of the world, to smooth over the code and work around their distortion, and they feel the hand vanish from theirs, and the people in front of him go up into smoke, and they’re so tired of this. So tired of it all being torn from them. So tired of receiving no answers, of not even knowing the right questions to ask by the time they return to awareness, of seeing and then forgetting and seeing again and speaking words that are not theirs and yet are, of watching events that never occurred and yet did, and—

They reach out. With what, they don’t know. With the force of their will, perhaps. With a side of themselves they do not often bring to the surface, because they know what they are but no one else does, and there is a reason why they keep their eyes hidden. There is a reason why they take care to tread lightly.

They take the world by its code, and they wrench it back.

“I’ve failed almost everyone else,” they hear themselves say. Quietly, aching. “I won’t fail those who are left.”

The void buzzes around them. It all swims in and out of focus, shimmering like illusion, like light fractured in a waterfall, like a picture projected in the air, faded and sepia and lacking substance. The piglin shifts and changes before their eyes; sometimes he is flesh and blood, sometimes the code, the universe magic that nests in all their hearts, and sometimes he is a hundred thousand voices and a hundred thousand eyes, chanting for blood and watching it drip.

“They’re not gone,” the first voice says. “They’re not fucking gone, we can still save them, we can still—”

“They are,” they say. “They are, Tommy, I’m so sorry.”

There is a man. Sitting on the other side of the man on the ground. The man is holding the winged man’s other hand. Gently, tenderly. The man’s face is twisted in sorrow-vindication-grief-regret. The man is familiar. No one sees that the man is there but them, and the man looks up and meets their eyes.

There is a noise like the rushing of trains. There is a noise like fingertips dragged against concrete walls. There is a noise like wailing, like grief immeasurable, and like a symphony dragged to a premature halt, the note-that-should-not-have-been-last hanging in the air like a mourning cry.

Their hold shatters. The void snaps them up.

They are unmade. Or they are unmaking. The universe does not want them here.

They are—

“—et! Eret!”

—on the floor, back to the wall, Fundy crouched in front of them, reaching out but not touching, his face wide open in terror. Every inch of them buzzes with some unknown force, with the void that creeps and clings almost like an old friend, familiar in its scraping nails. And the buzz—it is magic, racing through their veins, unconstrained, like a backlash, like a rubber band snapping, like they summoned up power and made themselves its vessel, and they are overtaken by it, by this magic with nowhere else to go.

They’re shaking out of their skin.

“Please,” Fundy is saying, “please, I don’t know what to do, you’ve got to, you’ve got to, I don’t even fucking know, should I go get somebody? Like Niki? Should I go get Niki? How is Niki going to know what to do? Oh gods, I don’t—”

The magic is abating. The void is flickering on their skin, but less now.

“Fundy,” they manage, and Fundy stops talking, looking at them.

“Eret,” he says back.

They force themselves to lean forward, bracing themselves against their knees rather than the wall behind them. How did they get here? They were on the couch a moment ago.

“I’m alright,” they say. “I’m sorry, I’m alright. I’m alright now.”

“What *was* that?” Fundy asks. He sounds close to hysteria, and guilt twists in their gut. They should have anticipated this, should have told more people that this was happening to them. Except, they had no idea that it was such a—*visible* thing.

“I don’t really know myself,” they say. “It’s been happening for a while now. I—should have told you about it. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“You were—” Fundy says. “It was like—it was like you were *glitching*. But I’ve never—I mean, I know hacks, I know the kinds of stuff that can happen, but I’ve never—I’ve never seen anything like—and it was like—like the void itself was trying to get into the world and get *you*, and it was—” He breaks off. Twitches like he wants to dive forward, wants to come closer at the very least, but stops himself. Holds back. And then, he makes eye contact, and looks down just as quickly. “And, um. Your eyes are sort of—”

Their hand flies to their face. Their glasses aren’t there.

The magic is gone entirely, and they are grounded in a wash of icy dread.

“Oh,” they say weakly, and duck their head. Their gaze alights on the glasses quickly; they’d just fallen, not broken or vanished like they feared. So they grab them and shove them on

their face again. “Right. Sorry about that.”

This apology burns, though it’s expected. They hate having to apologize for something that’s part of them. But what else are they supposed to do? They know full well why people—why their *friends*, even—would have cause to be wary of someone with eyes like theirs. And they wish they could say that those fears are completely unfounded, but while they would never hurt the people they love, they know that they—

That they—

“No, um, it’s fine,” Fundy says, still not looking directly at them. “I mean, so they’re just—they’re just like that? Actually?”

“They are,” they say. Where is this disappointment coming from? Is it because this went so well with Tommy? They should have known better than to hope for a positive reaction from everyone. That’s never how it works, and it’s likely that Tommy’s the exception that makes the rule, rather than the standard.

Still. All of a sudden, the room is suffocating, the air pressing in too close. And Eret feels glad that they came over to Fundy’s rather than the other way around, because they wouldn’t like to kick Fundy out of their place, but they can’t—they’d like a moment to themselves, they think. To recover their nerve.

So they stand. And Fundy jolts, scrambling to his feet as well.

“I’m sorry I ruined our night,” they say. “I think I ought to get home.”

“Wait,” Fundy says, “wait, hold on, are you sure you’re good to be, like, walking? That looked—I mean, I couldn’t really tell what was happening, but you’re just—better now? Really?”

The concern is—nice. Nice to know that he still cares. Nice that he’s not pointing at them and calling them a monster, or something equally ignorant and hurtful. So, really, that could have been far worse. Could still be, they suppose, but they’ll worry about that later.

“I’m fine,” they say, and they try for a smile. “Do you want to pick this up again another night?”

Fundy hesitates.

“Of course,” he says. “Yeah, of course.”

Does he mean it? Eret can’t tell. They hope so.

“Great,” they say, and they sound a bit hollow even to themselves. “Good night then, Fundy.”

And they walk out the door before they can find out whether Fundy would stop them or not. If he does try, they don’t hear him, and he doesn’t come after them, so they stride down the steps and onto the grass, and they start for home. For L’Manberg. And that’s when they realize that they remember.

They draw up short.

A piglin, bloody and grieving. A dead man who surely could not fly. Someone by their side, someone that they called—who *must* have been—Tommy, angry and distressed and sounding like so much shattered steel.

And—

They are standing on the obsidian field. They look down.

“What’s happening to me?” they say, faintly. “What is all of this?”

They are not unfamiliar with strange occurrences and stranger magics. They are what they are, after all, and they always have been. But this is something new, is something different. This is—they still can’t make sense of what they witnessed, but they can remember it. They can remember it.

Finally.

And so, again, they reach out. To the void and past it. Into the code, into the distortions that they create by existing, by being what they are. And here, the void feels closer than it ought to be. Dangerously so.

The stars screech warning. They ignore them.

The void rushes in.

“You did something you weren’t supposed to do,” someone says, and they turn.

The man is there. The man who appeared, and yet was not there at all. A man who does not exist within the confines of this world, or within any. The man has brown hair, white-streaked. Round glasses. He is wearing a long brown coat, a yellow sweater. A familiar flag is sewn onto his sleeve. His eyes are brown, and they are dull, and they are far older than they should be.

“Don’t take my word for it, of course,” Wilbur Soot says. “I’m not real. I’m just a dead thing. An echo. It never pays to listen to echoes. I’m all bitterness and void, now.”

Their mouth is dry. The void clutches them. And something beneath.

“What did I do?” they whisper.

“Man, do you think I know?” Wilbur says. A smile plays about his lips, but there is nothing of happiness in it. “S not like I got front row seats. I’m pretty sure you broke the universe, but that might not be it at all.” He tilts his head. “It’d make sense, though, considering. You broke the world, and the shards of what you left behind latched onto you. They’ve got nowhere else to go.” He narrows his eyes. “I suppose I should be grateful, that all you did was betray us. Child’s play, next to this. I ought to be thanking you.”

“What?” they manage.

Betray. That—sparks something. Something out of their grasp. But—they wouldn't.

They *wouldn't*.

Why do they feel sick?

“It's all destruction, in the end.” Wilbur's voice is almost gentle. But something about it is also very *wrong*. Empty. “That's all this server is. That's all it brings. You'll see, I suppose.” He puts his hands up, suddenly. “Not that you'll see anything from my direction. I'm not anything. You've got bigger problems, I think.”

“Why are you—” they start, then stop. Bigger problems. What problems?

Red vines. Something beneath. Words they don't remember saying, that they didn't understand and still don't.

“Here?” Wilbur finishes. “Who's to say that I am? Tell me, Eret, have you ever waited for a train before?”

Slowly, they nod.

“Imagine waiting for years,” Wilbur continues. “And then, one finally comes. And you've gone through phases, of sorts, but you decided fairly recently that if a train did come for you, you'd get on it after all. So you get on. You're riding toward the light. You think you're going to be free. And then, it all dissolves under your feet. And you're in the void, and you know you'll be in the void forever. No escape. And it's fitting. It's like poetry, almost. Something that rhymes.”

They can't speak.

“Like I said,” Wilbur says, “I'm a dead thing. I'm not even real. You might not be either. I don't fucking know. What does any of it matter?” He takes a soundless step forward. They take a loud step back, their foot landing hard against the dark rock. “We're alike in that way. And I mean, in the way that the universe fucking hates us. And why wouldn't it? But it's all a fucking show. You've just reset it to the first act.”

They can't—

“And we've all our parts to play,” Wilbur says softly. “All over again.”

“Then what's mine?” they force out.

“I thought I knew,” Wilbur says. “But you've rewritten that bit of the script.”

“And yours?”

“I'm not real,” Wilbur says. “You can't reset the void. The void is forever. So I'm here, and I'll always be here. But I'm not a real boy, me. Just an echo.”

Eret thinks that's not true. They know that's not true, somewhere between the thrum of the void that encircles them and the stars that are still hissing. But they don't know what to do. With him, or with any of this. Are these answers? Or are they only more questions?

"Things fall apart," Wilbur says. "The center cannot hold. Do you know that poem?"

They shake their head; they may have heard it, but it slips away from them in the moment. Wilbur smiles. In his face, they see almost nothing of the Wilbur that they know. And yet, they see everything. There is a terrible sort of symmetry. A terrible sort of becoming. A tragedy happened, once. Will happen. They don't understand, even still, but they're on the cusp of something. On the edge. But enlightenment comes with a cost.

"You've got the void in a death grip," Wilbur says. "You'll have to let go eventually. We all do." He tilts his head again—to the other side, this time. "Some of us more gracefully than others. And some more willingly." He sighs. "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

They can only disrupt the natural way of the world for so long. And to keep doing it here—the stars are screaming for them to stop. And they think the stars might be right.

There is something below the obsidian field.

"The blood-dimmed tide is loosed," Wilbur says, voice slanting, taking on a storytelling cant, recitative, "and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned. Its hour come round at last." He takes two steps forward, and extends his arms slightly, palms out and all fingers pointed downward. The expression on his face is mocking, but there is something else. Something sad. Hopeless. And familiar.

Eret loses their grip.

The void snaps out of their reach. The world rights itself. They can no longer hear the stars. They're alone, in the dark and in the quiet. Wilbur is gone. If he was ever there at all.

But he was. He was. He still is.

They feel wrong in their body. Unsettled. Like it doesn't fit right. Like it's too small. They take a step forward and fall to their knees, and just try to breathe.

But here is not the place. There is something below the obsidian field. They don't know what, but they think of red vines and a sword through someone's chest and Tommy's agonized voice, and their newly-found penchant for gold and the gaps in their memory and the things that they say sometimes without knowing why, and they think of all the things they can't remember. And they think that something is approaching.

And the word rings out: *betray*.

They wouldn't.

Their fingers close around the bracelets on their arms, tug on their dangling earrings, pull at the dark blue of their coat, of their uniform, of the outfit that proclaims to all the server where

their allegiance lies. And then, their hands come up to their hair, and they find no crown, but there is a weight missing where it would sit. Empty space, waiting. And they would look good in one. A crown.

They think they have worn one before. They think there is part of them that believes it their due. A crown, a kingship. They would do well with it.

“But I wouldn’t,” they whisper. “I won’t. I swear it.”

The words fall flat as a promise. It’s a long time before they’re able to stand and get themselves home.

Chapter End Notes

The poem that Wilbur quotes this chapter is The Second Coming by W. B. Yeats.

Also, if you don't mind a little bit of shameless self-promo, and you liked the vaguely horrorish vibes that crept into this chapter, I blame said vibes on the fact that I've started writing a horror fic. So, if you haven't seen it and you think you might enjoy something with *checks notes* c!Ranboo, c!Wilbur, analog horror, eventual Benchtrio, ghosts, secrets stacked on more secrets, Ranboo being in way over his head, and an eventual happy ending I promise just trust me haha, [I now have a fic for that here!](#)

And once again, thank you all so much for your support <3

[My tumblr](#)

Next up, Chapter Fourteen: In which, worlds away and across the span of several months, Philza Minecraft goes to check his mail.

Phil

Chapter Notes

The combination of finals fast approaching and lore picking up left me with no time to answer comments again, but thank you all so much for the response to the last chapter! I'm really glad you all enjoyed seeing more of what's going on with c!Eret... and others :D

Considering that lore is indeed picking up again, here is probably as good a place as any to remind you that I have set the canon divergence point for the future timeline, and anything that occurs after it in canon won't be taken into account unless it's stated otherwise. So, there won't be a whole lot of references to recent lore included in this fic (no matter how tempting some of it is to play with).

No additional content warnings for this chapter, I believe!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Later, he'll be able to divide the letters into categories. The first: before L'Manberg. The second: after L'Manberg.

For now, they all sit in the same stack on the cluttered desk in his room, and the sunlight slants across all of them in just the same way. There's nothing, really, to mark them as different from each other; the more recent letters seem shorter, the handwriting slightly more rushed, but he's taken that in stride. If Wilbur's really trying to run a country, he must be busy. Not too busy to write, thankfully, though Phil is more than aware of his son's capabilities.

It would be a little while before he'd truly have to get worried.

Not yet. Not yet.

"You'll look back and wonder what you missed, later," the crow says. "Just like before. And like never."

He blinks. Looks at the bird.

"That," he says, "makes no fucking sense. What am I missing?"

The crow blinks back innocently, the little shit. As if it and all of its compatriots haven't taken to spouting cryptic, nonsensical bullshit at all hours of the day.

"You got a letter?" he asks. It's rhetorical—he can see the paper gripped in its beak, and a few letters penned in a familiar hand. He holds out his palm expectantly, arching a brow.

“Give.”

The crow hops forward. Cocks its head, a gleam in its eyes like it’s considering flying off with it. And it might—it’s not a regular, he doesn’t think. There’s certain birds he recognizes, but he doesn’t think this one has given him its name. And the ones that only stop by tend to be a little more rude. He’s had to chase down more than one; Wilbur’s messengers seem to think that inconveniencing him is funny. It’s a running theme.

The crow places the letter in his hand. It’s only a little bit torn.

“Thanks, mate,” he says.

“Please teach your son self care,” the crow says, and he laughs, waving his arm.

“Wilbur can take care of himself just fine,” he says. “Go on, get.”

The crow squawks at him indignantly. And then heads back out the window it came from, black feathers drifting to the ground. He rolls his eyes; none of the birds have any sense of manners, generally speaking, but the ones that move through and don’t stay are usually even worse than the average.

Not that it’s all that much trouble, picking up the feathers. He has to pick up his own all the time. So he does that, his motions steady and methodical as the sun climbs higher outside the window, and then he sits down, settles in. He opens the letter gingerly, so as not to rip it—or rip it further, rather. He squints at the small tear the crow left behind. He does wish they’d be more careful. But then, they are birds. He doesn’t know that he can expect much else.

Wilbur’s handwriting is tilted and familiar, curling and just slightly ornate. It’s always suited him and his flair for the dramatic.

Dear Phil,

I’m afraid I haven’t much time to write, so I’ll have to keep this short. I’m not sure whether you get any news at all from different servers—if you do, you’re probably heard already, for all the publicity this has gotten. I was surprised, honestly, though perhaps I should have expected it, from a server owned by such a public figure as Dream is.

I’m rambling. Mostly, I’m writing to say that the election is over, and I am speaking to you as the lawfully elected president of L’Manberg. Tommy is still in place as my vice, with Tubbo rounding out the rest of my cabinet. With the business of the election finally finished, I’m very excited to make L’Manberg into the shining and prosperous city I know it can be.

Unfortunately, I can’t invite you to visit just yet. I want you to see us at our very best, and for all our potential, we’ve a ways to go. Someday soon, I hope I can ask you to come, and that you’ll find something here to be proud of.

Also, I’m not sure how much you’ll be able to help me with this, but I was hoping for a bit of advice. I believe I told you that Fundy was running in the election. I was proud of him for taking the initiative, at least, even if I wasn’t certain that his motivations were in the right

place for him to take charge of the country. Either way, it doesn't matter, as he decided to attempt to commit voter fraud. Our relationship since then has been strained, and I'm not sure how to deal with it—I can't hide the fact that I'm disappointed in his choice, and I don't understand why he would feel the need to do that in the first place. Do you have any ideas as to how to broach it with him? I wouldn't normally ask it of you, but I'm at my wits end.

Parenthood certainly has its challenges. I don't know how you managed with me.

I'll write again as soon as I'm able, though it may not be very soon, depending on what my duties demand of me. If you wouldn't mind putting in a good word with Technoblade for me, that would be appreciated in the meantime—I think he doesn't approve of me forming a government. You know how he is.

All my love,

Wilbur

He's smiling by the time he's done reading. He hadn't heard about the results officially, and though a few of the crows had informed him delightedly of Wilbur's victory, he knows better than to believe a word they say without verifying it against an outside source.

Regardless, it sounds as though Wilbur is doing well. And it warms him, a bit, that Wilbur doesn't think himself so grown that he can't come to him for advice. And with parenting, no less. Wilbur never had the opportunity to commit voter fraud in his youth, but he's sure he can think of a similar anecdote to share, one that might at least soothe his anxieties. Wilbur tends to get worked up over small things, and while having a spat with a family member is never pleasant, he finds it fairly likely that he's blowing the whole thing out of proportion. Sons will be sons, after all, and sons act out every now and then, whether that be through committing voter fraud or playing a guitar horribly out of tune for seven straight hours.

He winces at that memory. He can't even remember what prompted that incident, just that Wilbur, when angry, really knew how to express his displeasure.

He's got plenty of anecdotes.

He'll think about it more, and write back in the evening. He's sure he'll be able to think of plenty to say.

One of the first things he learned, long ago, was that routine is important on a world like this, on a world where he is the only player, the only creature who knows the song of the universe. On a world where he is effectively isolated, effectively alone, save for the little outside communication he manages to receive. It's not as though he minds; this is the life he's chosen, after all, and he values his solitude. Other worlds will be waiting for him when he

decides it's time to visit, other servers will hold their arms open, and old friends are there for reunions whenever they wish.

For now, routine is important.

He wakes, feeds the animals, checks on the livestock, visits the mob farms. He goes for a flight, stretching his wings and feeling out the air currents, going as high as the world will let him before tucking them in close and diving, hurtling for the ground, and then snapping them open again and sticking the landing, heart pumping, grin wide on his face.

And then he goes and collects sand. When he's got several shulker boxes full, it's off to the nether. And then, rinse and repeat. Chat accompanies him, squawking his ear off about whatever comes to their minds, interspersed with exclamations of "Pog!" and "Dadza!" and whatever other catchphrases they've latched onto for the time being. He talks with them as he works, dividing his attention evenly between them and his task and his surroundings, and the day passes quickly, just as all the other days have before it. It's monotony. It's routine. It's comforting, familiar. It's what he prefers. Him and his crows and his builds, and the constant underlying threat of losing his life, just enough to keep him alert and on edge, a continuous low thrill.

Not that it means too terribly much to him, considering. He knows who will catch him, should he fall to the void's embrace.

The days pass. His work progresses, slowly. He gets a letter, every now and then, though true to Wilbur's word, they're short and infrequent. It's to be expected. He's just glad to hear from him at all. And every time, there is some variation on, *Don't come to visit just yet*, and Phil's willing enough to humor him. Wilbur's trying to make something of his own. He doesn't want to barge in on that. Wilbur's capable, and Wilbur's independent. He doesn't want or need his dad peering over his shoulder.

There is one that comes, a few weeks after the election, that catches his attention, a bit.

It opens in the customary way, with Wilbur going on a bit about how life is in L'Manberg. It sounds idyllic, like he and his friends are having a lot of fun, despite the work. He's happy for him. But then, there's a section that seems a little different.

Speaking of Tommy, it reads, he's actually been acting a little bit off lately. I'm almost certain there's something wrong, but he won't talk to me about it, and it only seems to be getting worse in these past few weeks. There was a while when I think he was talking to Tubbo, at least, but I'm no longer so sure that that's the case. Whatever it is, it's really weighing on him. I suppose what I'm getting at here is, do you have any advice? I probably shouldn't share any more for the sake of his privacy, and I know you don't know him particularly well, but he's very important to me, Phil. I want him to be happy, and I don't think he is.

That does sound like a bit of a problem, and one that he's not sure he can help too much with. Because it's true; he doesn't know Tommy very well. He likes the kid well enough, from what he's seen of him at tournaments and the like, but Tommy's certainly far closer with Wilbur than he is with him, and he's been content enough to keep it that way, to let Wilbur adopt whatever strays he likes without pressing too far into it.

But then, he can't imagine that it's as serious as Wilbur is making it out to be. The thing with Fundy has blown over, he's fairly sure—at least, there's been no more about it in recent letters, and Wilbur would definitely keep complaining to him if things weren't going his way. He always would, as a child. So, this thing with Tommy is probably something similar, is probably Wilbur falling into that old habit of catastrophizing.

And besides, how old is Tommy? Fifteen, sixteen? Something like that? A teenager, certainly, and teenagers are unstable creatures. Moody, volatile. He doubts that there's anything that Wilbur actually needs to be worrying about.

The crow that delivered this letter has stuck around, is holding itself very still on his windowsill, watching him with wide, dark eyes.

"You want me to write back right away, is that it?" he says. "Alright, I guess. Though if you wanna be more quick about it, you could just go on back to Wil yourself and tell him it'll all be alright."

The crow regards him. Hops a bit to one side.

"He's not alright, Dadza," the crow says. "He watched everyone he loved die, and you too."

He blinks.

"What?" he says. "Who?"

The crow blinks back.

"Philza Minecraft is a dentist," it says, very helpfully, and he swats a hand at it.

"Okay, get the fuck out of my house," he says, and the crow takes off in a flurry of wingbeats and feathers. And he settles down to write.

This letter is a little bit longer than most of the recent ones.

Dear Phil, it begins. They always begin that way. *Dear Phil*.

Dear Phil,

I think it's been a bit since my last letter, and if it has, I apologize for that. It's easy to lose track of time, and so much paperwork crosses my desk that it can be hard to keep tabs on what's what! I need to invest in a better organizational system, I think, though when I'll get around to that, I don't know. But all is well here. L'Manberg continues to grow and prosper, and everyone is cheerful and in good health.

Since my last letter, we've done a good bit of work on reinforcing the walls. Security is one of my top priorities, and while I can do little to protect my citizens when they are outside of the country's boundaries, I can at least ensure that they will be safe within it. The walls are a historic and essential part of L'Manberg, symbolic of our secession from the surrounding lands of the Dream SMP and our willingness to stand up for ourselves in the face of Dream's tyranny. Being inside them means that we're home, and together. And to be frank, I also think they look very impressive. I hope that you agree, when you see them.

The main point of this letter, though, is that I wanted to tell you about the festival we'll be holding in a few weeks! It will be our first official celebration as an independent nation, not counting the celebrations after gaining independence and my election victory. Those were rather impromptu, but we're putting a good bit of planning into this one. We're inviting everyone to join, even Dream and his men, as a gesture of good faith and future cooperation. It pays to be on good terms with the neighbors, after all, now that independence is won. No offense, but conquering everything within sight isn't exactly my style.

I've put Tommy and Tubbo in charge of organization and events, Niki's on food, and Quackity—I've told you about Quackity, haven't I?—has volunteered to be in charge of marketing. I'll admit, despite our political rivalry, I'm glad to have him here. The man knows how to promote an event. It's my hope that everyone will arrive, and that all will go off without a hitch. No doubt there will be a few hiccups, of course; I've found that there often are. But I've planned for a few, and I've some ideas in mind for smoothing things over, if need be. Hopefully it won't be needed, since technically, the war is long over and none of us are enemies anymore. Only time will tell.

I'm actually looking forward to this quite a lot. I think it could really be the start of something great.

Unfortunately, I still can't formally invite you to visit. But I think I'll be able to soon. I'll aim to send my next letter after the festival, to tell you how it went, and if all goes well, perhaps I'll finally be able to extend a hand. I just want to be sure that I have something here that's truly worthy of being shown off. I want you to see us at our best.

I do hope to see you soon. It's been too long. You could even bring Techno, if he's willing, and if you can drag him away from those potatoes of his! As long as he promises not to turn his newfound bent toward anarchy on us. I can assure you, nobody in L'Manberg is being oppressed. That's the antithesis of what we stand for.

I'll close the missive here. Please, stay safe and well. Don't let the crows bully you too much, and try not to break any of your incredibly brittle old man bones.

All my love,

Wilbur

That's his usual sign off. All my love. Wil has a lot of love in him. Phil's always been proud, to have raised someone with so much heart, so much caring.

It sounds like he's doing well. Like everyone's doing well. The thing with Tommy wasn't mentioned, so he'll assume that's been resolved. And the festival sounds like a lot of fun.

"You think Techno would go on a trip with me?" he asks the crows. There's three of them at the moment, perched on the fence. The sky is a bright cerulean, not a cloud in sight, the sun beating down merrily. It's a lovely day for lovely news. "He's done with his whole potato war, isn't he?"

It's been a little while since he spoke to Techno. They can do that, can go months or even years without seeing each other, and then pick up right where they left off. Not a difficult thing to do, when the current of time passes them both by. He knows his own sense of timing has grown slightly skewed, over the centuries. A handful of years feels like nothing at all.

"He won," the crows agree.

He snorts. "Course he did," he says. "Alright. I'll talk to him later. It'll be nice to see Wil again." He pauses, and looks toward the sky, placing a hand on the top of his hat. No, not a cloud in sight, though a dark blot in the distance tells him that he's got more of chat incoming. He'll enjoy the peace while it lasts. "Though I'll wait 'til he gives me the go ahead. Don't wanna interrupt him when he's still getting his feet under him."

Sometime after this festival of his, then. He'll await the next letter.

It'll be good to get offworld. There's only so much sand one can dig up before one starts to seriously question one's life choices. He never regrets undertaking large projects, but—it'd be easier on him, if he didn't. He knows that. But he's never been smart enough to resist. Techno calls him reckless, sometimes. But that's a pot, kettle sort of thing.

Phil breathes in the fresh air, and stretches his wings out as far as they can go, catching the light. It's warm against his feathers, almost like an embrace. It really is such a nice day, and even nicer, now that he has this letter to go back over, and the promise of another one soon to be sent. The promise of an invitation soon to be extended. He's excited to see L'Manberg. It sounds like Wilbur's poured his heart and soul into it. He's sure it'll be brilliant. He just has to wait for the next letter. Just a little bit longer.

The next letter never comes.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, c!Phil, you well-meaning, oblivious *fuck* (affectionate).

There's a bit of foreshadowing in this chapter, some obvious and some not. There's one bit that I'm very curious to see if people will get; it relies on a slightly obscure reference, so maybe not. We'll see. In the meantime, I'll sit here and giggle to myself about my plans :D

[My tumblr](#), which you should consider following if you haven't, because I give you banger posts like [this one](#) /hj

Next up, Chapter Fifteen: In which Sapnap was kind of looking forward to this whole festival thing. He didn't expect it to go quite like it does.

Sapnap II

Chapter Notes

First of all, sorry this chapter took more than a month to get out! I wasn't anticipating that it would take this long, but here we are. There was an unfortunate combination of writer's block for this fic, the length that this chapter ended up being, and the fact that I find c!Sapnap immensely difficult to write lmao. But here we are! With over 10k words!

Secondly, thank you all for 2,000 kudos??? Y'all that's so cool, literally thank you so much

No content warnings this chapter that aren't in the tags, I believe, but *mind those tags*. Seriously. Particularly a couple of the newer ones.

Let the festival begin.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The festival actually looks like it's going to be a good time.

He'll admit, he wasn't sold on it. Not when it was first announced, not when he got his invitation. But he resigned himself to going pretty much right away, as soon as Dream received an invitation too. It was easy to see the tension in him, the particular set of his shoulders and the tilt of his head, so he knew right away that Dream would attend, no matter how smart a decision it was. And he and George were hardly about to let Dream walk into former enemy territory alone.

But as soon as he steps through the gates of L'Manberg, Karl comes bounding up to him, grinning widely. He is, for some reason, dripping wet.

"Glad you made it!" Karl says. It's pretty obviously directed mostly at him, and his chest warms. "Hey George, hey Dream. Oh, hey Punz!" Then, Karl turns his grin back to him, and Sapnap finds himself grinning back. It's easy, with Karl.

"Why are you soaked?" he asks, and Karl shakes his head a little, flinging water droplets at him.

"They've got a dunking booth sort of thing set up," he says. "I volunteered. Fundy did too, and Tubbo. I'm trying to get Quackity to do it. C'mon, you should help me out." He grabs his hand, tugging on it a little, and Sapnap lets him, stumbling forward. He casts a glance back at Dream, not sure what his play is, whether he wants to present a united front or just genuinely go and have a good time—he doubts the latter, because Dream's preoccupation with L'Manberg hasn't exactly gone away even now that the war is over and he's got the discs—but Dream shrugs at him.

“It’s a festival,” he says. “We’re here to have fun.”

There’s something in his voice that says there’s more than that. He probably wants to get the lay of the land more. Gather intelligence. The Greater SMP is, on paper, now allied with L’Manberg, or at least in a truce. They trade and talk and pass back and forth between their respective lands with little issue. For all that the walls are imposing, Wilbur has never ordered that the gates be closed. So nominally, everything’s fine. But Dream’s always been bad at letting things go.

Today’s supposed to be good, though. And Dream knows that.

“Of course we are,” Karl says, cheerful, chipper. “Come on, let’s go.”

He lets Karl lead him further into the nation. Dream follows at a more sedate pace, and along with him, George and Punz.

There is indeed a dunking booth, and other games set up, like a carnival—a ring toss and one of those ones where you throw beanbags into holes and even a couple that look like they use more complicated redstone, something to do with shooting streams of water at targets. Why they went through the trouble to do that when they could just use a bow and arrows, or a crossbow, he’s got no idea. Maybe one of them’s a redstone nut. He doesn’t know all of them well enough to say.

The central area where everyone has gathered, near and around the stage, is decked out in streamers and ribbons, all flapping in the slight breeze. There’s balloons, too, multicolored and drifting. A few are floating high in the air, loose from whatever held them down to earth. And it seems like the whole server is here; he sees Niki with a table of baked goods, and Wilbur chatting with Tubbo off to one side, and Hbomb with an arm slung around Eret’s shoulders, and Fundy trying to tug a protesting Jack toward the dunk booth as Ponk waits next to it, tossing a couple of stones in their hands. There’s Sam, and Antfrost, and Bad—no sign of Skeppy, but that’s not uncommon—and he should probably go and say hi at some point. He even spots Callahan, regarding Tommy of all people with a curious expression as Tommy talks at him, mouth moving way too quickly to guess at the words.

He can’t remember the last time the server came together like this; almost everyone is here, and everyone seems happy, and the mood in the air is bright and carefree and enthusiastic, and Sapnap finds his hand tightening around Karl’s. Gently, a slight squeeze, and Karl squeezes back, grinning at him again.

“Sapnap, hey!”

Quackity appears at his other side, and he’s smiling too. Quackity’s smiles, he’s noticed, come off as practiced, sometimes, like he’s putting way too much thought into them. It was especially noticeable while the election stuff was still going on. But this one is fully genuine. It’s kind of nice to see.

“Hey,” he says. “You guys actually did a nice job with this.”

Quackity makes a *pshhhh* sort of noise. “You say that like you expected anything less. Have a little faith in us, Sapnap.”

“Yeah, I kind of thought that this might suck a little bit,” he admits. “But this is cool.”

“Of course it’s cool!” Quackity only seems to be a little bit offended. “You think I’d settle for a shitty festival?”

“That’s what he kept insisting to me,” Karl adds. “I don’t know exactly what he was involved in, though. It kinda seemed to me like he was just supposed to be the official hype man or something.”

“I’ll have you know that my position was far more official—”

“It looks great,” he says. “Seriously.”

Quackity stands a little straighter, puffing his chest out. Sapnap wonders if it’s subconscious or not. The gleam in Quackity’s eyes tells him that it might not be, that Quackity might be playing it up a little right now. That’s fine. They’re joking around. It’s comfortable, the three of them. More comfortable than Sapnap has felt around people not Dream or George for a while. Maybe even including Dream or George. Or maybe he’s just being stupid.

“Then what are you waiting for?” Quackity says. “Come on, man! Unless *Dream* said no.” His tone is only lightly mocking.

“*Dream* said it was fine,” he says, and adds, “and he’s not my boss. We’re friends. I can pick who I hang out with.”

“That’s us!” Karl cheers, pumping his fist in the air. Quackity smiles again, warm and satisfied, and just like that, they drag him into the festivities. Not that he’s complaining. That’s what he’s here for: the festivities and his friends.

In Karl’s case, his fiancée. They’re going to honeymoon at the Eiffel Tower, someday. And in Quackity’s case—maybe a friend, maybe something more. He’s feeling it out.

Leaning toward something more. And he thinks Karl feels the same way. He hopes that Quackity does.

They don’t manage to convince him to go in the dunk tank. Karl goes for a second time, and Sapnap dunks him on his second try. He comes up spluttering and complaining, hair and hoodie soaked once again. It’s sunny, though, and fairly warm for October, so he just wrings himself dry and rejoins them, hitting Quackity in the arm as he starts making comments about being wet.

Quackity takes them over to where Niki’s set up with her baking, and he manages to strike up a lively conversation right off the bat, but Niki’s not too pleased to see him. He can tell that right away. Which is fine; they’re not friends, and he honestly doesn’t think they ever will be. She’s got reason for it, and he’s got reason for steering clear in return. That whole thing was an annoying mess from start to finish.

So she doesn't really talk to him, but she doesn't deny him food, so he leaves with a plate of warm cookies, and Karl gets a funnel cake for the three of them to share, and the powdered sugar gets absolutely everywhere and Quackity starts griping about it, even though he can't seem to stop himself from laughing. Sapnap can't remember the last time he felt so at peace, and he kind of feels guilty about it as soon as the thought crosses his mind, because of course he's been at peace. All the pet stuff aside, things have been quiet since L'Manberg was given independence. There's been plenty of peace. Plenty of time to just be with his friends.

And so what if Dream's been distant? Saying weird shit? Refusing to let the disc thing go even though he has them now, and even though taking them from Tommy like that was pretty obviously a shitty move? That's—it's a lot, when he thinks about it like that, but Dream gets in weird moods, sometimes. He always has. This is one of those, and it'll blow over, and even if it doesn't, things are still fine. He and Dream and George are a team, inseparable, a package deal, and nothing's ever going to change that.

Even if Dream's acting off. Even if George is pulling away, apathetic and tired all of the time.

They're fine.

They get a table, the three of them. Him, and Quackity and Karl. A different trio. He has no idea where Dream and George went, and that makes him feel lighter than maybe it should. Conversation floats all around him, and laughter, and someone's got some kind of music playing, and for a second, he's struck with the idea that maybe, the L'Manbergians have gotten something right. That maybe, they sort of know what they're doing, with this place that they've made. That maybe they really have built something, something kind of like a community and kind of like a home, and that maybe this is one of those moments. The ones that feel like captured lightning. Charged, electric, something about to be loose. Impossible to get back, once gone.

He's here. He's part of it. He doesn't know that he's part of it in the way that he wants to be. Not just the festival—all of it.

That's a realization. He feels guilty about that one too. He can't—he doesn't want to join L'Manberg. That's not what this is. Can't be what this is. But there's something about the thought—

“So how is L'Manberg, these days?” he asks Quackity. He doesn't know what he's hoping to hear. That things are bad? That under this bright, happy surface, everything sucks? That Wilbur is actually a tyrant and the rest of the people not worth putting up with? That this is a sinking ship?

No. That's not what he wants to hear. Even if it should be what he wants to hear.

He's thinking about this too hard. He needs to stop.

Quackity quirks a brow at the question.

“Everything's great,” he says, and his voice lands like he means it. Quackity doesn't always mean the things he says. He's good at talking in circles without revealing very much. But

Sapnap's learning how to tell the difference between showman Quackity and real Quackity. This is real Quackity. Relaxed, no walls to keep up. "Uh, I mean, Wilbur and I don't always see eye to eye on things, but you know, that's not so bad. We talk things out, we respect each other, he keeps my opinions in mind."

"But he doesn't follow them," he says.

Quackity laughs, just a bit. "Have you ever tried to get Wilbur to do something he didn't want to do?"

He has. Quackity knows that. Or maybe he doesn't know the details. He doesn't actually know how much Quackity's been told about events from before he arrived. The origins of L'Manberg. The van, the drug trade that he took it upon himself to stop once it was clear he wasn't invited to join in. The war that resulted, that led to all of this, and to this warm fall day and celebration and good company.

"Take the walls," Quackity continues. "I said we should get rid of them. It's not like we need them, right? All they do is put a barrier between us and the rest of the server. They show that we're trying to keep everyone out, or maybe even that we're trying to keep everybody in, y'know? This is a free country, and I think that we don't need them. But Wilbur disagrees, and now they're higher and thicker than ever. Good luck trying to persuade him otherwise." He shrugs, lips twisting. "I disagree with him, I really do. But at the end of the day, he's the president, won fair and square, and it's not like he dismisses me out of hand or anything. At least he listens before doing the exact opposite of what I'm suggesting."

"It seems like a lot of people do that on this server," Karl says. He looks down at his fingers, covered in powdered sugar, and then deliberately swipes them across Quackity's face. Sapnap expects Quackity to erupt, but instead, he freezes up. And then shakes himself, shooting Karl a glare.

"Keep your hands to yourself, man," he says, and this, he doesn't sound like he means at all.

"Case in point," Karl says, and brushes Quackity's other cheek. He looks kind of dumb, both sides of his face streaked with sugar and maybe a few cake crumbs, and Sapnap starts to laugh as Quackity grumbles, no heat behind any of his complaints.

And that's all on that topic. Sapnap doesn't trust himself to ask anything else about it. He should content himself with that, with knowing that everything is good here, and even Quackity and Wilbur are getting along relatively well. He should content himself, except that's made him feel significantly less content, and he thinks he knows the reason why, and he thinks it's a little bit worrying.

L'Manberg is appealing to him. He doesn't know when that happened. Doesn't even really understand why. And it's not as if anything could ever come of it, because Wilbur would never let him join, but—

The fact that it's a thought at all is something. It's something. Something to be ignored, probably. At the end of the day, he's going to go home with Dream and George, and everything will be just the same.

This is—a whim. A whim, an impulse, and he'll treat it like one.

The day lengthens. Tommy manages to rope almost everyone into a game of capture the flag, which somehow does not result in severe injury despite the fact that quite a few people went to war against quite a few of the other people present. Sapnap joins Tommy's team, curious—curious, and nothing else—about what it would be like, and maybe wanting to check up on how the kid's been doing lately. Which means that he loses, because Tommy loses, because Fundy is also on this team and he does not get along with Fundy at all, and also because Tommy himself seems to oscillate back and forth between about five different strategies depending on which way the wind is blowing, and he's also apparently refusing to let Tubbo leave his side for more than about five seconds. Which is a little more clingy than usual, and Tubbo seems kind of annoyed by it, but Sapnap is more annoyed by the fact that they *lose*.

Which means that he's going to have to put up with Dream's gloating later.

But later is later, and after capture the flag, someone gets a karaoke machine set up, and somehow that manages to be even more chaotic than the war game. Sapnap's not too sure how aware he is of the passage of time, at this point, which is strange for late afternoon and not being even remotely drunk, but he's always got either Quackity or Karl next to him, usually both, and they drag him up for a few songs every now and then. He's never prided himself on his singing voice, but it's fun, doing it with them. Like there's no pressure on him at all. And everyone else is into it, too; Jack sings a song that for some reason, sets Tommy to trying to leap onto the stage and strangle him, Tubbo goes for a few, and then Eret and Niki, Niki and Fundy, Bad and Sam and Ant, and after some heckling—again, mostly from Tommy, and then Tubbo—even Wilbur gets up and sings something, stiffly at first but then switching halfway through to some kind of unidentifiable accent apparently for the sole purpose of pissing Tommy off. George manages to shove Dream onstage at some point. Callahan gets up, stands there for a few moments, bows, and then leaves again, to thunderous applause from half the crowd.

It only ends when Jack stands up again, and Tommy actually manages to scramble up there with him. In the ensuing scuffle, the mic ends up shattered on the ground, which seems like a fitting conclusion to the whole affair.

“Unbelievable,” Quackity mutters, but there's fondness in it.

“Who are we rooting for?” Karl asks. “I'm gonna root for Jack. Punch him, Jack!”

It's hard to tell who wins. Eventually, they both roll off the stage and into the dirt, and for the next five minutes, that becomes the new entertainment. Sapnap finds himself calling out encouragement, mostly to Tommy, but also to Jack, because it would be funny if Tommy lost, and it would be revenge for leading them to failure in capture the flag.

He doesn't know how long it is before the fight breaks up, both of them scowling at each other, mud across their faces, but by then, Wilbur has gotten up on the stage, staring both of them down with a very unimpressed look.

“I guess that's the end of karaoke,” he says dryly. Even without the mic, it's not difficult to hear him. Wilbur has a voice that carries. “Thank you, Mr. Vice President and Mr. Manifold.

Next time, don't break anything I'm going to have to pay for."

Jack Manifold salutes. Tommy rolls his eyes, and then goes back to the bench where Tubbo's sitting, watching Wilbur expectantly. A speech then, probably. Had to happen some time. Hopefully it'll be short.

Everyone stills, a hush falling.

"If I could have your attention for just a few minutes," Wilbur says. "There's a few words I'd like to say before we bring dinner out. Everybody thank Niki, by the way, she's arranged for all the food and cooked most of it herself, so it's due to her that we're not all starving."

He claps his hands, and everyone joins in. Niki flushes, but grins, waving at the people around her. Sapnap can't hear what she's saying from here.

"I'd also like to thank Niki and Tubbo for jointly working on the decorations, Quackity for getting the word out, and our own Vice President for helping with organization."

More applause. He really, really hopes this will be short. But Quackity seems pleased with the recognition, and closer to the stage, Tommy is grinning. There's something off about it, though. He can't put a finger on what. It's probably nothing.

"With that out of the way," Wilbur continues, "I would like to thank all of you for being here, and for making this event a success. Everyone here has had their differences, some more than others, but I think it's very meaningful that we've been able to put all of that aside for a day of celebration. I hope that we can use this day to usher in a new era of prosperity and peace between all of our respective factions."

They're nice words. Sapnap can tell that he's sincere. And honestly, he doesn't have any complaints. Wilbur's idea is a little naive, maybe, because there's always going to be conflicts. That's how this server is, how the people on it are. But there's no need for anything else to get so overblown. No reason to work back up into a full scale war. He likes a good fight, lives for it, even, but it's better when you can go home at the end of the day and know you still have friends.

"So, once again, thank you all for coming," Wilbur says. "And thank you for having a good time. That's what this was about, in the end. I hope we can look forward to having other events like this in the future." He smiles, pausing for applause, which does come, somewhere more than polite and less than raucous. And then, when that dies down, he says, "If anyone else would like to say something, I'll open up the floor. Anyone is welcome."

He hopes no one takes Wilbur up on that. He kind of wants dinner. But then, Tommy turns his head more toward everyone else, crossing his arms.

"You are mostly all the worst," Tommy says, "and I do not like a very good many of you. But yeah, what Wil said, thanks for coming and not fucking—killing each other. As Vice President, I take my responsibilities very seriously, and that includes no murder, unless the one getting murdered is Hbomb, in which case I will turn my head away and plug my ears and hum a little tune."

“Okay, hang on,” Hbomb says, “what did I do—”

“I am going to make cat maids illegal,” Tommy says. “I have already talked to Tubbo about it.”

“Big Law has spoken,” Tubbo adds, helpfully, as Hbomb starts to splutter. Sapnap lets his attention drift.

“Aw, man,” Karl says. “I think Hbomb makes a good cat maid.”

“That is more than I ever wanted to hear about,” he says. “Is there gonna be more food now? Quackity, you’d know.”

“Yeah, it’s about time for that,” Quackity says. “Niki’ll probably start bringing stuff out. As long as that doesn’t get any worse.”

Sapnap glances back to where Tommy and Tubbo are bickering with Hbomb and rolls his eyes. The crowd is starting to go back to individual conversations, though people seem mostly content to stay where they are, on the benches and chairs in front of the stage. Even Wilbur looks a bit more relaxed, leaning on the podium as he watches Tommy’s antics, smiling slightly. Niki is indeed working her way out of the area, Eret following after her.

And then, Dream rises.

“Actually,” Dream says, “I’d like to say something, too. If that’s okay with you, Wilbur.”

Beside him, Quackity goes stiff, and Karl makes a questioning noise. He can feel both their gazes on him, like they think he knew Dream was going to speak. Like they think he knows what Dream is going to say. He doesn’t. He didn’t know Dream was planning anything. Hopefully, it’s not a big deal. Hopefully, Dream is just going to give a few comments along the same line as Wilbur’s, and the sudden rigidity in his spine is completely unwarranted.

But there’s something about the way Dream inclines his head toward Wilbur. Mocking. Sardonic. Sapnap knows how to read Dream’s expressions, mask and all, and there’s something in this one that doesn’t bode well.

“Of course,” Wilbur says. People are going quiet again. “This is an open platform, Dream.”

“Great,” Dream says. “I just wanted to say thanks for inviting me. I know that we’ve had our differences in the past, but I’d like to put all of that behind us. No matter how we’ve wronged each other, I think we should look forward to the future. Like you said, an era of prosperity and peace.”

Something’s up. Something’s up, because this—really doesn’t match with the way Dream’s been muttering these past few weeks and months. Sapnap knows better than to believe that Dream actually wants to let bygones be bygones. Dream holds a grudge with the best of them, and he definitely still holds one against L’Manberg. Sapnap just thought that he was willing enough to leave it alone for the time being, willing enough to not start more stupid conflict.

So none of this tracks.

“What is he doing?” Quackity hisses in his ear. All he can do is shake his head, shrug.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Wilbur says. “I agree, we should strive to work together and move past our former disagreements.”

This isn’t right. He scans the crowd. Some of them are confused, others curious. Those who actually fought in the war look a little more wary; Eret has stopped where he is, turning back with a frown on his face. Tubbo’s brows are furrowed. Fundy shifts in his seat.

Tommy is standing up, now, staring at Dream, and the expression on his face reminds Sapnap of that night a few months ago, when Tommy broke into their base trembling, defensive, and barely coherent, demanding to trade his prized discs for L’Manberg’s freedom. The way he looked at Dream then, with some strange mix of terror and anger and loathing and fascination, is the same way he’s looking at Dream now. And his hand is clenching and unclenching, twitching like he’s barely stopping himself from going for his inventory.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Dream says. “This server is so much better when people aren’t fighting each other all the time.” He pauses, and to anyone else, it may seem incidental, but Sapnap is sure it’s deliberate. For effect. To draw out—whatever this is. “Actually, there’s something else I’d kind of like to bring up, just in the name of problem solving. I don’t know if this is really the place for it, but I thought it might be easiest to talk about it here, while I’ve still got your time. You know, since you’re always really busy.”

Wilbur’s eyes have tightened around the corners, just slightly, but he nods. “By all means,” he says, more cautious than he has been yet. Which is saying something—Wilbur’s tended toward caution, lately. The reinforced walls speak to that.

“Great,” Dream says. “Hey, Punz, could you come up here?”

“*What* is he doing?” Quackity says, way louder, but no one seems to be paying attention, not with the sudden outbreak of murmuring. Karl follows that up with a quiet, “Yeah, what *is* he doing?” But Sapnap can’t answer. Not when he doesn’t know.

But the fact that Punz is involved in—*whatever* this is, means that it was premeditated. Planned out. And Dream didn’t breathe a word to him. Didn’t even tell him to expect any kind of disruption at all. And that kind of makes him feel sick to his stomach. Since when does Dream leave him out of the loop like that?

And even besides that, what the actual hell is he trying to pull?

Slowly, Punz stands, making his way to the open space in front of the stage. He was over by Ponk and George, and as Sapnap cranes his neck to look, he tries to catch George’s gaze. It’s tough to see his expression behind his goggles, but he’s good enough at reading George to know that his pursed lips mean annoyance. And then, George realizes he’s being watched, and shrugs at him.

So George didn’t know either. Should that make him feel better, or worse?

“So, we’ve got kind of a problem,” Dream says, once Punz has joined him. “Don’t we, Punz?”

There’s a moment of hesitation. Not long, but just long enough to catch. Just long enough to make him wonder if *Punz* knows what’s going on, or if this is something that Dream’s come up with on his own. Punz will go along with it, of course; Punz is loyal to Dream even without the payment, and Dream pays well. And Punz is nothing if not a professional.

“Right, yeah,” Punz says. “Sure. We’ve got a problem.”

Dream nods, and then inclines his head toward Wilbur. “I know you probably didn’t authorize this or anything, so we don’t need to turn this into a big deal. But, the rules of the server still apply, y’know, even though you’ve got your own nation, so we don’t really appreciate it when you come onto our lands and grief our stuff.”

He doesn’t know where Dream’s going with this. Nothing’s been grieved lately, or at least, not majorly. Not in a way that he can imagine Dream actually getting worked up over. But maybe Dream was just waiting for an opportunity. Maybe the severity of the grieving doesn’t matter so much. But still—what is he referring to? Punz’s place is fine, as far as he’s aware.

“So, Tommy’s put a bunch of obsidian right outside Punz’s house,” Dream says, “and it’s ugly, and pretty annoying. So I was just thinking that you could do something about that.”

Wait—

“That’s what this is about?” he mutters, and Quackity’s head snaps toward him, expectant. But he feels too distracted to give an explanation. He’s seen the obsidian, but it hasn’t bothered Punz all that much, and as far as grieving goes, it’s very tame. It can barely be called grieving at all; it’s not in Punz’s base to begin with, just outside. Punz doesn’t even claim that land as his. So what the fuck is Dream playing at?

Unless it’s not the obsidian that’s the problem. Unless the problem is that Tommy was the one to put it there. Unless Dream’s been looking for an excuse.

Unless Dream really, really wants to start something. No matter how flimsy the premise.

Punz is holding himself stiffly, eyeing Dream, and it’s obvious that this has taken him by surprise. But Sapnap’s eyes are drawn to Tommy.

He’s not entirely sure that Tommy is breathing. Tommy has eyes only for Dream. And that *face* he’s making—

He’s never seen Tommy as an enemy. Not even during the war, not really. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say that he’s never hated Tommy, even when they *have* been enemies. He doesn’t really understand how people could hate Tommy; sure, Tommy’s loud and stupid and annoying as hell, but that’s what kids are. And Tommy’s more than that. Maybe other people just aren’t good at recognizing as much. He’s always been fond of Tommy’s passion, the way he launches himself headfirst into whatever he wants to do. It reminds him a little bit of himself, in a way. And Tommy’s got a drive to protect, too, to protect what he cares about

with everything he has, and even though what he cares about and what Tommy cares about aren't often the same, he relates to that. He's protective too.

It's not often that he's felt the urge to protect Tommy, though. And especially not from Dream.

It's just—what does Dream think this is going to accomplish?

"If that asshole doesn't shut the fuck up," Quackity says. Not even all that quietly. But other people are talking too, murmuring among themselves. Niki and Eret have both stepped closer again, and Niki is scowling ferociously. Tubbo has stepped up right beside Tommy, though he can't tell whether Tommy's registered that or not.

"I don't get why this is a big deal," Karl says, a whisper right in his ear. "If they don't like it, why don't they just get rid of it? They've got netherite. And hey, free obsidian!"

"I don't know," he says. "I think Dream's trying to start a fight. I don't know why."

"Oh," Wilbur says, from the podium. "This is about—right. He didn't mean any harm by it."

"Yeah, I know," Punz says. "It's not a big deal." He glances at Dream. "I'd just—like it gone, I guess."

Dream's nod is almost imperceptible. Sapnap still catches it.

"Well, that's easy enough," Wilbur says. "Tommy, how about you go and clean that up tomorrow?"

"No," Tommy says.

Dream shifts his feet. The surrounding chatter stops. And it's not like it should be a big deal, because it's not like Tommy's said anything unexpected; it's Tommy, after all, and Tommy is belligerent to a fault, so of course he'd buck against being told to clean up something he worked on. But it's something in the way he says it. Something flat, something absolute, something that makes it seem like more than a simple denial. Something that makes it seem like Tommy won't be moved.

Dream won't like that.

"No?" Dream says mildly.

"No?" Wilbur echoes, sounding more confused than anything else. "Tommy, I know it's a pain, but it won't take that long."

Tommy shakes his head. And then keeps shaking it. "No," he says, "no, I can't, it's—it's gotta stay where it is, we can't—I'll, I'll make it up in some other way. I can, I can do something else, but it has to, it has to stay there, and—and you *said* you didn't care!" That's directed toward Punz, whose lips thin. "You said, you came out and you saw what we—what *I* was doing, and you said you didn't care, you even said it looked cool! You said you didn't, you said—"

Punz casts another glance toward Dream before he speaks. “I guess I changed my mind,” he says. “It really isn’t a big deal, I just want it cleaned up.”

Sapnap wonders how much Dream is paying him for this.

Tommy shakes his head harder. His hands are clenched into fists, one foot scuffing into the dirt. His eyes dart wildly, but they land on Dream most of all. Tubbo steps closer; he doesn’t seem to notice. “No, no, you don’t—you don’t understand, it has to stay there, it’s—it’s really fucking important, and I can’t, I can’t say, but it’s like, it’s just a thing, it’ll help later, you’ll *see*, but you’ve gotta, you’ve gotta keep it there, you’ve gotta let it stay, I can’t clean it up, I can’t. Please.”

And on the last word, Tommy looks to Wilbur.

Wilbur, for his part, is looking increasingly alarmed, though he’s making a decent effort to maintain his composure.

“Is there anything else you’d like him to do?” Wilbur asks. “In exchange for keeping the obsidian there?”

It’s a valiant effort. Sapnap could have told him that it wouldn’t work. Not with Dream like this. Whatever this is.

His hands feel clammy. Should he be doing something? He feels like he should be doing something. But if he goes up there, he doesn’t know what side he would take, and that revelation is actively terrifying. He should take Dream’s side. Dream is his best friend, even if he’s acting kind of like an asshole right now. But the thought of going up there and siding against Tommy makes his stomach roll.

Because Tommy looks scared. And not the good kind of scared, not the scared that comes from being beaten in an honest fight or a type of scared that’s earned, that comes about from retaliation for something else, tit for tat. It’s a kind of scared that’s just—sickening.

“Oh, c’mon now,” Dream says. “That’s not how this works. I’d think you’d have more control over your citizens, Wilbur.”

“And that’s not how *that* works,” Wilbur says. “I’m a president, not a dictator, and I won’t sacrifice Tommy to your whims. Either we come to a compromise, or I’ll have to ask you to leave our country until one can be reached.”

“You don’t think that’s kind of rude?” Dream says. “You invited us in here, talked about unity. Unless that was all a lie. Maybe you’re not as much about peace as you claim you are, Wilbur.”

“Okay, this is bullshit,” Quackity mutters, and moves to stand. A sword drops into his hand. He’s not the only one, the air is full of light clinks and pings as people reach for weapons, or at least ready their inventories. Sapnap should be among them. His hand is itching, his blood running hotter, the promise of a fight burning through his veins. He lives for this kind of shit.

But he doesn't want it right now.

Everything was so good. And now Dream is just—

Bullying a kid. That's the easiest way to put it. He's focused a weird amount of attention on Tommy—which, it's always sort of been that way, but at least during the war, their efforts were more focused on taking down L'Manberg as a whole. Or at least, that's how he thought it was. That's how he was thinking about it. He's pretty sure that's how George was thinking about it.

Maybe Dream wasn't.

He doesn't want to fight. Not now, not like this. He wants this to stop. He wants Dream to be joking. Because if he's not joking, he's being an asshole for no good reason, and that's not something that he's familiar with, not something he knows how to deal with, or how to stop. Because going against him—would be like betraying him, right? And he doesn't want to betray Dream. Dream's his best friend.

"That's a load of crap," Tubbo says steadily. Tommy jerks, finally seeming to realize that Tubbo is right beside him. "You're the one who's trying to make this into a fight."

"I'm not," Dream says. "This could all be solved right now if Tommy would just agree to clean up his mess. But he's not, so I don't see how any of this is my fault. It's not unreasonable for us to want him to fix what he did to Punz's house."

"Near Punz's house," Tubbo says. "It's not in Punz's house. We didn't touch Punz's house. I was—"

"Tubbo!" Tommy breaks in, and tries to slap a hand over Tubbo's mouth. Tubbo bats the hand away, glaring, and continues.

"I was there, too, and so was Jack," he says, "so if you're gonna get all pissed off about it, you should get pissed off at all of us, not just Tommy. And it's right by Fundy's house, too, and he's not making a fuss about it, so it seems to me like you're getting all worked up over something that nobody actually cares about. Even Punz is saying it's not a big deal, so why can't you drop it?"

"But it's not really about any of that," Dream says. "It's the principle of the thing. It's you showing that you're unwilling to respect the laws put into place on this server, way before there were different countries or any of that. It's Tommy showing that he's unwilling to fix what he messed up. And honestly, it's showing that L'Manberg doesn't have a good handle on its citizens, which doesn't really give me a whole lot of confidence in our alliance going forward. It's not that I want to fight again, but I'm looking out for what'd be best for my side of things and my friends. How am I supposed to trust you if you don't at least give me some basic respect?"

If you're doing this for us, why didn't you tell me?

The thought is bitter, but it's deserved, and that makes it worse. Probably, Dream didn't tell him because he knew he'd see it as unnecessary. Probably, Dream didn't tell him because he's not thinking of his friends in this case at all. Maybe he's thinking of discs in an enderchest. Maybe he's thinking of battle plans that got shoved in a closet, schematics for weapons that were never built, whispers of psychological tricks that were never put in action. Maybe he's thinking of blackstone walls, and thinking of them as a personal slight instead of a reasonable boundary.

But Sapnap very, very much doubts that Dream is thinking about him. Or George. Or Punz. Or Bad, or Skeppy, or Callahan, or Sam. Or Alyssa, the one who left ages ago, who's already gone. At the time, he didn't understand why.

He's beginning to. He wishes he wasn't, and he still doesn't think he agrees, but that understanding is beginning to form in a way that it never has before. It's not a nice understanding.

"You're blowing a simple prank out of proportion," Wilbur says, "and I'd appreciate it if you didn't speak to my Vice President like that." And at the same time, Tubbo says, "Don't talk to him like that, man, come on. Be reasonable here."

"I am being reasonable," Dream says. "It's not unreasonable to ask Tommy to remove the eyesore that he put up right next to my friend's house. How am I the unreasonable one here? If Tommy's the Vice President, he should know better! He should be held accountable! Unless you just let your government do whatever they want to whoever they want."

"I think you are being unreasonable, actually," Wilbur starts, heated, a flush rising on his cheeks, but before he can go any further than that, Tommy speaks, and everyone else falls silent. The whole crowd. It's an unnatural hush, like someone's hit a mute button.

"So fight me for it, then," Tommy says, and it's a long, long moment before anyone says anything at all.

"What?" Dream asks.

"Tommy—" Wilbur says.

Tommy takes a step forward, chin jutting out. His gaze is unrelenting. Dream cocks his head, apparently unaffected.

"Fight me, Dream," Tommy says, and there's something in the way he says it—like he expected this to happen all along and like he never wanted to do this and like it's the only thing he ever wanted to do and like he's angry and confident and terrified all in one. Or maybe Sapnap's imagining all of that, because his heart is in his mouth and he's not nearly close enough, and he's just been sitting here, doing nothing as this all unfolded, because—because *what*? Is he really so much of a coward? He's never thought of himself as one, but here he is, unable to so much as pick a side. So much as draw a sword. So much as stand by his best friend like he knows he should, or, failing that, tell his best friend that he's being an asshole and that he should cut it out.

Something must have changed. It's obvious that something has changed. He's never been too wary to call Dream out in the past. So something is different. He thinks he might know what. He doesn't want to know what.

"Just you and me," Tommy continues. "Nobody else. No armor. A fair"—His voice wavers—"a fair fucking fight. If I win, the obsidian stays there, and you have to leave m—you have to leave it alone. If you win, if—I can't, I can't take it down, I *can't*, but if you win, I'll, I'll tell you. I'll fucking tell you, I'll tell you why, and you'll see. You'll see, it's fucking important. More important than you."

Dream shifts. He's thrown by Tommy's insistence, Sapnap can tell.

"Alright," Dream says. "That sounds fair enough. Right here?"

"Sure," Tommy says, overriding Wilbur's "Absolutely the fuck not," and his voice barely shakes. But barely is more than not at all.

Quackity swears, and finally leaves his position, moving closer. Others are doing the same, gathering around. The air is like ice on a lake, stepped on, too thin to hold, about to crack. The festival's been ruined, he's pretty sure. No way are they going to have a nice dinner after this.

A hand lands on his arm. Karl's.

"You good?" Karl asks.

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah, I'm—I really wasn't expecting this."

He's not sure why he says that, of all things. Maybe he just needs someone to know, and to believe him. That he didn't know that this was where they were going to end up. That Dream didn't tell him.

"I don't think any of us were," Karl says, brow furrowed. "Is this gonna be okay?"

He doesn't know. He can't reply.

He moves closer.

There's a ring of people around the two of them, now, crowding close but not too close. Around the two of them, around Tommy and Dream. Dream has an axe in his hand, netherite and gleaming with enchantments. It takes a moment, but an axe drops into Tommy's, too. They're fighting with weapons. Serious weapons. He hopes someone has pots on hand. Someone's sure to get hurt. Blood's about to be spilled. Usually, he'd revel in the excitement, might even want a piece of the action himself, but everything about this feels so very wrong.

So he steps up, and grabs Dream's arm.

"Are you sure about this?" he hisses, and for the first time since this started, Dream looks at him. He thinks. Hard to tell, with the mask. It hasn't always been hard to tell.

“C’mon, Sapnap, it’ll be fine,” he says. “This’ll be quick.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he says. “Do you need to do this?”

“Sapnap,” Dream says. Sharper. “If I let this go, they’re just gonna keep taking. Maybe this isn’t a big deal, but how long until something happens that *is*? We have to reinforce our boundaries.” And he steps forward, closer to Tommy and away from him, and his hand slips from Dream’s arm.

It’s a reasonable explanation. It rings false.

Tommy’s been talking furiously with Tubbo and Wilbur, in low undertones. The gathered people are pretty clearly divided; the L’Manbergians are sticking to Tommy’s side, while everyone else is closer to Dream. So much for unity. Sapnap meets Quackity’s gaze. Quackity makes a gesture, and looks between him and Dream.

Sapnap shakes his head. It’s all he can do.

No, I can’t stop this. I’m sorry.

Because what good is a sword that doesn’t know who to attack?

Dream and Tommy regard each other. Tommy is definitely trembling. Dream is stillness and poise, the only discernible excitement in the clench of his hand around the handle of his axe. There’s no way, really, that Tommy is going to win this fight. Tommy’s pretty good, but Dream is far better. There’s only one way that this is going to end.

“We want a clean fight, gentlemen,” Wilbur says. His eyes are tight, pinched, and his face is pale. Unhappy, visibly shaken. He can’t imagine what Tommy said to him, to get him to go along with this. It’s not often that he agrees with Wilbur on anything, but he figures that right now, their thoughts aren’t running along completely different lines. “No gratuitous maiming, nothing that can’t be fixed with a health pot. No dirty tricks, and when someone surrenders, that’s it. No more. There are people on both sides ready and willing to intervene if this gets out of hand.” He stops, and then says, quieter, “Tommy—”

“It’s *fine*, Wilbur,” Tommy says. He doesn’t glance back, eyes only for Dream. “Just call it. Count from five.”

Wilbur sets his jaw. It’s easy to tell how discomfited he is.

“Five,” Wilbur says, “four—”

Feet shift in the dirt.

“—three—”

Tommy grimaces. Dream straightens.

“—two—”

How did it come to this?

“—*one*.”

They both move. There is a clash of metal on metal, and sparks fly, and then they’re moving back, and clashing again, and it’s quick and messy and sudden, and there is no fun in this at all, no joy from either participant, and Tommy’s face has twisted into something that must be terror, and it’s not fun to watch, either, not fun from any perspective, because this is something brutal and ugly and if he didn’t know better, Sapnap would think that they were both trying to kill each other.

And Tommy holds his own.

That’s the most surprising thing. He doesn’t remember Tommy being this good; and he’s not, really, but he’s keeping his head above water regardless, keeping his wits about him, and it’s not so much that he’s *good* as he seems to anticipate Dream’s movements, seems to have an answer for everything, seems to be able to guess where Dream is most likely to strike and get there before he does, seems to have an understanding of Dream that Dream doesn’t have of him. He doesn’t know when that happened, or how, but it means that the fight isn’t over in fifteen seconds, like he thought, and like Dream probably thought too.

Twenty seconds. Twenty-five. Thirty.

“Get his ass, Tommy!” Tubbo calls. Hesitantly, like he’s not sure it’s the time for it. But it shatters the silence, fills the space with more noise than just the axes slamming into each other, and like a spell’s been broken, people start to call out their own encouragements, haltingly and then more sure, until the fight itself is barely audible under the noise, the whooping and hollering, and the atmosphere lightens, like this is a friendly brawl, no stakes behind it, a fight between friends.

But it’s not. The atmosphere lightens, but not enough to ignore that.

Forty. Forty-five. Fifty.

“C’mon!” he calls out, and doesn’t know who he’s talking to.

Dream draws blood, a line down Tommy’s forearm. Tommy feints backward, then lunges in, inside his reach, and scratches a line down Dream’s chest. Shallow, but it rips a hole in his hoodie. Dream’s definitely going to be pissed about that.

People shout. Karl jostles him. Quackity’s over on Tommy’s side. They meet eyes, briefly.

Fifty-five. Sixty.

Sapnap clocks the moment Dream gets frustrated. The moment Dream decides to change the rules. Maybe it was the plan all along. Or maybe it’s just a flare of temper. Either way, Sapnap can tell what’s going to happen about half a second before it does, and as he registers it, Dream is moving back, giving himself distance, and there’s a crossbow in his hands, and people are yelling, and the bolt is fired, and the bolt is going to go wide.

There's not enough time to process. To react. Dream is moving, and everybody is moving, and Tommy is moving, and it's all a howl of sound and blurs of motion, and the shot goes wide and it has to be an accident, has to be an accident that it's going to hit Tubbo and not Tommy, except it does hit Tommy, burying itself in Tommy's shoulder because Tommy steps in the way, like it's instinct, like there's nothing else he could possibly do. Dream fires a shot, and the shot goes wide, and the shot is streaking for Tubbo, and Tommy takes it instead.

And it happens just like that. Within the span of a second.

There's no moment of quiet. The eruption is immediate, and Sapnap barely notices Karl grabbing onto his arm, because he's only got eyes for the opposite side, for the way Tubbo staggers as if he was the one hit, and then lurches forward next to Tommy, and Wilbur follows half a beat later, and all of L'Manberg is surging, clustering around, and there's a shit ton of yelling and people are drawing weapons, and there's the clanking of armor being withdrawn from people's inventories—in L'Manberg, and that rule of theirs is so stupid, but it still feels wrong, somehow, that people should be wearing armor in L'Manberg—and his own sword is in his hand, and he doesn't remember how it got there.

What is he going to do with it?

Defend Dream. Or attack for Dream. Just as he's always done.

He's never felt paralyzed before, in the face of a fight. Never expected to. Violence is his blood. His life.

He's never not known what to do.

It was an accident. It has to have been an accident. Dream got stressed, so he missed.

Tommy still has his axe raised toward Dream. One hand has found the bolt, is pressing down against it, around it. There is blood welling between his fingers. But he doesn't put the axe down, doesn't slip from a battle-ready stance, even as his friends crowd around him. He's barely moving, not speaking. His face is white, drained. It's almost like he's ignoring the injury entirely.

No sixteen-year-old should take a shot to the shoulder with such calm.

Wilbur's stepped in the middle of things. Speaking. Sapnap can't hear him. He's not wearing armor, one of the only ones who isn't, and he holds no weapons. Does he think he's going to be able to deescalate this?

Dream steps forward, his aggression unrelenting. Sapnap wasn't looking at him in the direct aftermath, didn't see how he reacted, whether he paused, whether there was shock, or remorse. Surely, for all his grumbling, he doesn't want to hurt Tommy *badly*. But he's stepping forward, crossbow still raised, and there's people backing him, Punz on one side and —*there's* George, where the hell has he been in all of this?

Sapnap doesn't move forward. Neither does Karl. There are others hanging back. Ponk, Hbomb. Bad, Ant, and Sam, sticking together like they're a single unit instead of individuals.

Sapnap shouldn't be one of the ones hanging back. He's never one of them.

Everyone's talking, shouting, yelling, and it's so hard to tell what anyone's saying at all, but for a moment, Dream's voice rises above the rest—

“—be *fine*, he knew exactly what he was agreeing to when he suggested this, or are you letting him get out of taking responsibility *again*—”

and then Wilbur's voice rising to meet him—

“—over because I say it is, this won't continue, and it was stupid to allow it to in the first place, so you need to back down—”

and there are others, too, Quackity and Fundy and Niki, and he thinks he hears Tubbo talking to Tommy, frantic and unsure, trying to get a response out of him, and Tommy's just standing there, and then he says something, too quiet for Sapnap to hear, but it makes Tubbo jerk and Wilbur cast him a wide-eyed look, and then Wilbur makes a gesture and Tubbo tries to pull Tommy back—to get some fucking healing potions, hopefully, somebody's got to get the kid a pot—but Tommy yanks himself away, steps forward toward Dream, and Dream levels the crossbow, and Tommy says—

“We're not fucking finished,” Tommy says, and Sapnap doesn't know what to make of his tone, but he does know that this isn't going to end well—it already hasn't, *shit*—and he's proven right when Dream shrugs, hands flickering between axe and crossbow, and says, “If you want to keep going, that's fine by me.”

So Tommy tries to step forward, and Dream goes to meet him, except then Tubbo is there again, sword raised and teeth bared, and Niki has a bow pointed at Dream's chest, and Quackity's holding an axe in unsteady hands, and everyone is cramming in, pushing close, so Sapnap doesn't see who starts it, but there's metal on metal that's not Dream and Tommy, and he should be doing something, should be fighting, but somehow, all he can do is watch, watch as Punz steps forward with sword in hand and Tubbo whirls to meet him, as Niki fires an arrow that doesn't land in his view, as Quackity tries to get Fundy to stay back, as Wilbur fruitlessly tries to stand between Dream and Tommy, hands still raised and mouth working up a storm, eyes flashing and gestures wild and back straight like a president's should be, and Sapnap has Karl next to him and all he can think about is, *who the fuck do I attack?*

It should be simple. Should be easy. It always has been. He should be at Dream's side.

He should—

But it wasn't supposed to be this way. Not today.

He steps forward, sword raised. It's hard to know where to look. It's chaos, confusion, a rout, nothing like any fight he's been part of. He doesn't know what's happening. He's never been overwhelmed by a battle before, and he doesn't know why he is now, except he kind of does, but he doesn't want to admit it, because that would mean—

He should just—

He takes another step. Halfhearted, toward Dream. He hears Karl behind him, a hesitant, “Sapnap?” Maybe he should just stay with Karl. Karl can hold his own, but not like he can.

And then Punz dodges away from Tubbo. Switches to a bow, fires toward Niki, and then toward Tommy. Eret yanks Niki out of the way. The second arrow hits Wilbur in the chest.

Sapnap can’t tell if Wilbur saw it coming. If he had time to move and didn’t, or had time to move and did. Had time to move and made a choice, or had time to move and made the opposite. Or didn’t have time to move at all. He doesn’t pay much attention to Wilbur during battles. Wilbur is not a physical threat. Not really. Not unless he’s got a bow and is standing at least thirty feet away. Today Wilbur does not have a bow, and he is standing right in the thick of things, and for a moment, Sapnap thinks he’s the only one who sees that he’s been shot. Him and Wilbur. The world narrows.

Wilbur wavers on his feet. He blinks. His hands freeze mid-gesture, and come down to lightly feel at the wound. His brow furrows.

The rest of the world comes crashing in when Tommy shrieks.

“*Wil!*”

More motion. Someone crosses in front of his view—George, he thinks—and even Dream stumbles back—definitely surprised—and Tommy lunges at him one more time before turning to his brother, trying to steady him, but it’s too late for that because Wilbur is going down, sinking to his knees, and Sapnap knows injuries like that. He’s been injured like that. He knows what it feels like, to die from a wound like that. How many manhunts with Dream resulted in him dying in similar ways, over and over, from an arrow or a sword or an axe or a cleverly placed trap?

A lot. So he knows. The force of gravity triumphs very quickly, when you’ve been hurt that bad.

But he’s never been hurt so badly here. Not where it mattered.

This is a three-life server. Three lives, only two removed from true hardcore. Three lives and you’re done. Dead. Not just ejected from the world. Dead, your code dissipating, your soul going—wherever the dead go. The void, maybe, or the infinite universe, or somewhere else entirely.

Deaths count, here.

Deaths count. But only to three.

Tommy gets Wilbur on his back. Wilbur is gasping for air, a horrendous gurgle. A punctured lung, maybe.

It is quiet, this time. Still. No one needs to call for the fighting to stop. It just does. Easy as pie.

Punz slowly lowers his bow.

“I didn’t—” he says, and doesn’t finish. He’s too much of a professional for that.

“Dad?” someone says. It must be Fundy. Wouldn’t make sense otherwise.

L’manberg gathers. Everyone else backs up. Sappnap does, too. And then Ponk pushes their way forward with a snapped, “I’m the doctor, goddammit,” and Sappnap can’t really see Wilbur at all now, surrounded as he is, all his friends pressing near, and just for a moment, he manages to make eye contact with Quackity again, and Quackity’s glare burns into him, and even if he knew what to say, he doesn’t think that he could.

Tommy’s kneeling. Axe still in hand. Whites visible all around his eyes, breathing shaky, stuttering. He’s mouthing words, but not saying them aloud. His shoulder’s still bleeding. His shoulder still has a crossbow bolt in it.

Ponk curses. Ponk doesn’t curse like that very often.

There is a noise sort of like a whimper and sort of like a whine. It’s difficult to imagine Wilbur making a sound like that, as put together as he always is. The sound cuts off abruptly, followed by a rasping cough. And then nothing.

And then, in the center of the L’Manbergians, there are items. Not many. A few books. A fishing pole. A couple of cornflowers. Some wood. A shovel, and a stone axe. Three apples.

Someone grabs his hand. He startles. Dream’s mask fills his vision, blank white and smiling. But underneath, Dream is not smiling. He can tell. Or at least, he thinks he can. He hopes he can.

This was all an accident. Dream didn’t mean for things to escalate this far. He can’t have. Deaths count, here. They weren’t even trying to kill each other in the war, he doesn’t think; just defeat them, cow them. Deaths count here; they matter. And there wasn’t supposed to be bloodshed today.

Today was going to be fun.

“We’re leaving,” Dream says, and Sappnap nods, feeling distant and not present, and he lets Dream tug him forward, tug him away, away from the stage and the benches and the spot where they were all singing karaoke together—less than an hour ago? And he had Karl by his side, but Karl’s not there anymore, and earlier, he had funnel cake with him and Quackity, and everyone was laughing and everything was good, and he wondered if maybe L’Manberg had the right idea.

Punz just killed their President. Dream’s just injured their Vice.

What the hell were you thinking? he wants to ask. *Why would you start this? Why do you care so much about their stupid country? About Tommy? Why would you do this and not tell me about it? Why couldn’t you have let it go, for once, and just let us all be happy?*

The last is too traitorous. He doesn’t ask any at all.

He lets Dream pull him away. Punz and George are with them. They arrived together, and now they're leaving together, and Sapnap still has his sword in his hand, and he looks back.

There's a bloodstain on the ground. Ponk's hands are braced against their thighs, and they bring a fist up, and then down again, all futility and frustration.

Tommy is staring at nothing at all. His eyes are glassy. He's so still that he might as well be dead himself.

And the rest of L'Manberg is watching them go.

Sapnap follows Dream home.

Chapter End Notes

Oops :D

But hey!! At least Tubbo's fine!! Other than watching his best friend get injured and his other friend and role model die!! But he's physically unharmed!! So Tommy succeeded with that!!

Alternative titles for this chapter included 'Sapnap Pretends Everything is Fine Right Up Until He Can't' and 'Author Throws 10k of Sapnap POV Against the Wall and Hopes that the Characterization Sticks' (literally though I find c!Sapnap so difficult, please lemme know if I'm in the ballpark)

As always, thank you so much for the response to this story. The fact that we've made it to 2,000 kudos is nuts, and reading comments is always a highlight of my day!! And someday I will have the time to respond again. Someday. In the meantime, I appreciate y'all so much <3

[My tumblr](#)

Next up, Chapter Sixteen: In which Fundy has a chip on his shoulder, and is also having a Terrible, Horrible, No-Good, Very Bad Day. This is not a great combination.

Fundy II

Chapter Notes

Ayup, we're back!! Thanks for your patience!!

As always, mind the tags; there aren't any new content warnings, I don't think, but this chapter does follow directly after the previous one, so we've got blood, injury, aftermath of character death, and potentially precarious mental states.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's a really, really good day, right up until it isn't a good day at all.

Maybe later, he'll be able to remember some of the good. But right now, the image is imprinted on the back of his eyelids: Wilbur going down, an arrow sticking out of his chest. Wilbur gasping for air, and then choking on his own blood, Ponk snapping out that there's an arrow in his lung, and that they need space to work, dammit, and that there's a chance if they act quick. Ponk's hands, steady as they pull the arrow out, as they apply pressure, as they demand healing pots that nobody thought to bring, because today was supposed to be good and fun and it really, really was, right up until this—

Wilbur, eyes glassy, darting. Wilbur, unaware and visibly scared in a way that he has never, ever seen from him. Wilbur, his hands searching, grasping, clutching at the ground and at anyone near, but never stilling, never finding what they're looking for. Wilbur, his mouth moving, *still* trying to fucking talk, but no words making it out.

And then, a final gasp, a cut off whine, a bloody cough, and stillness.

It's a good thing, Fundy thinks, somewhat hysterically, that respawn works the way it does. If he'd had to look at his dad's corpse for a second longer, he would've lost his shit.

He thinks he still might be losing his shit.

Now, there's just items. Wilbur didn't even have any proper weapons on him, apparently, which is so like him that Fundy would very much like to scream. He is going to scream. He is going to scream very, very loudly, and then he is going to do someone some bodily harm. As soon as he feels like he can move. Or feel things. His chest is tight and numb, and he fought in a war, so he knows what shock is, and he knows that this is shock. He's in shock, because he just watched his dad die.

"Dammit," Ponk says, slamming their fists against their thighs. "Dammit, I'm sorry, you guys. I couldn't save him."

They sound very rattled. They're a doctor, or the best one they've got, but even during the war, there weren't any injuries like that. Even during the war, nothing escalated to this. The war was kind of scary, and it was definitely stressful, but nobody died. He didn't think that anybody would. Ever.

They're not quite on true hardcore, but there is a life limit. Wilbur's going to be alright, is going to come back none the worse for wear, but that doesn't mean that the death meant nothing.

"You tried your best," Eret says softly. She looks disturbed. Fundy feels an urge to laugh at himself for the observation. Of course Eret is disturbed. They're all pretty fucking disturbed. What just happened was pretty damn disturbing.

He sort of wants to be by her side, right now. Eret's probably one of the closest friends he has. But it hasn't been the same between them, lately, and he knows it's his fault, and he doesn't know how to make it up to her. It was just—scary, what happened that night, like she was having a seizure but somehow worse, like she was distorting the code of the server itself, and then her eyes—

It doesn't change anything. Not really. But he had a kneejerk reaction to finding out that one of his best friends is probably connected to the literal bogeyman, and he doesn't know how to apologize for that. If he can. Because he thinks about it, and there's still an undercurrent of fear there, an instinct fueled by the sight of those eyes, and he doesn't want to react like that, not to Eret, but obviously he's got something to get over, first. Some kind of ingrained response that he's got to get uningrained.

And until he can do that, he doesn't really feel like going to Eret for support is an option. He feels like that might be kind of shitty of him.

He shouldn't even—he shouldn't even need support, not really. Not for this. He's a big boy, he can handle it. Death has always been a risk. It was a risk during the war, even though he sort of thought that there was an unspoken agreement not to go that far. It's a risk all the time, even, because you can misjudge a jump or let a mob get the jump on you, and that's all it takes, sometimes, no matter who you are or what gear you have. Death's always been a threat. Always will be, on a server like this. And this was Wil's first, so he'll respawn in no time, and everything will be just fine.

But the picture won't leave his mind.

He's never seen Wilbur like that. He doesn't want to see Wilbur like that ever again.

It's funny. He never really considered the idea that it was possible to lose Wilbur. Like that.

It's not funny.

"Those assholes," Quackity says. "Those—I can't believe this. I can't fucking believe this. We put so much effort into extending the olive branch, and this is what it gets us?"

Fundy glances at him—the way he’s holding his axe is laughable; did he expect to beat anyone in a fight with that kind of grip?—and follows his gaze. He hadn’t realized that the space has cleared out. Dream’s gone, and all of his stupid friends. Sapnap, George. *Punz*. And everyone who’s not a part of L’Manberg has scattered, except for Ponk, still sitting and shaking their head.

Fundy can’t blame them for leaving, he supposes. It’s not their fight. They probably don’t want to get on Dream’s bad side. But it’s a lonely feeling, knowing that the L’Manbergians really only have each other.

If that.

He considers going to stand next to Quackity. But Quackity’s staring off into the distance, something twisting and agonized in his expression, something that might look just a little bit like abandonment, if he squints and tilts his head, so maybe he shouldn’t be asking Quackity for help. He shouldn’t be asking anyone for help. He can handle this. It’s not even a big deal.

There’s a whine trying to make its way out of his chest. He shifts his form away from his more foxlike features, which helps a little bit. But then again, a human face is prone to more emotions, and he can feel his eyes scrunching up, his mouth pressing together, and he doesn’t want to *cry*. He’s not a baby, not a kid anymore, and Wilbur’s going to be right back. He’ll come striding across the grass any minute now, face full of righteous indignation, ready to take charge of the situation. There’s nothing to cry about.

“Okay, well, what are we supposed to do now?” Jack asks. “We’ve just been attacked. I think this probably counts as an assassination, so our President’s just been assassinated. Tommy is literally sitting there and bleeding all over the place. The festival’s ruined. Does anyone have any bright ideas?”

“We can’t let them get away with this,” Tubbo says, but it’s more of a murmur, really. He’s crouched next to Tommy, putting pressure on the wound as best he can around the bolt that’s still sticking out of his shoulder. He keeps looking from Tommy to the place where Wilbur just was, and back to Tommy again. Fundy decides to look at Tommy, because he doesn’t like to look at the place where Wilbur just was. The grass under the items is stained with blood.

Tommy doesn’t look great either. His face is weirdly blank, his hands slack in his lap. He’s staring at the ground. His eyes almost look grey, which is also weird, because Tommy’s eyes are blue.

“What we need right now is to stay calm,” Niki says, stepping forward. Everyone’s attention goes to her right away, which she looks a little surprised by, but she squares her shoulders. “We can’t do anything right now, because Tommy’s hurt, and we need to make sure that Wilbur’s alright. Once we do that, we can start to make plans.”

Niki could help him. Niki’s probably his other best friend. Things have been a little bit frosty since the election, since he may have forgotten to tell her about the whole voter fraud plan, but he’s pretty sure they’re still friends. That she’s forgiven him. Niki’s not really the type to stay angry, and he did apologize to her, for not letting her know about it. And for doing it in the first place. Since in retrospect, it was a stupid plan that was never going to work.

Niki crouches down beside Tommy, barely sparing him a glance.

“Tommy?” she says, voice soft. “Are you alright?”

Tommy is clearly not alright, as his shoulder is still definitely bleeding. Tommy doesn’t respond, though, not even to say something stupid and snarky.

“Yeah, man, you should probably get that looked at,” Jack tacks on, at which point Ponk raises their head.

“I can get that bandaged for you,” they say. “If you let me run back to my base, I’ve got pots, too. I should’ve brought some today. I’m sorry.”

They sound almost as bad as if they were the one to wield the bow, which doesn’t make much sense to him. But then, he feels guilty, too, doesn’t he? He’s starting to feel a lot of things right now, through the numb haze, and he thinks that one of them is guilt. Maybe if he’d seen where Wilbur was, what he was trying to do, he could’ve gotten to him. Could’ve helped him. Could’ve at least made sure that he had a weapon on him. Something better than a stone axe.

Tommy still doesn’t answer, which is starting to verge on rude.

“Tommy,” Tubbo says. “Tommy, please.”

Niki reaches out to place a hand on Tommy’s other shoulder, but there’s something very hesitant in the way she does it, and she stops just short of actually making contact. Like she’s scared of hurting him. Fundy wants to tell her that Tommy’s not that fragile. That Tommy’ll be fine, once they fix him up, once they go find Wilbur, and can they do that now, please? Fundy would like to do that, to replace the most recent memory of him with something new. To replace Wilbur dead with Wilbur breathing, Wilbur scared with Wilbur strong. And he would sort of also like a hand on *his* shoulder, someone to tell him that it’s going to be alright, even though he shouldn’t need something like that.

But it’s not unreasonable, surely? He just watched his dad die.

He just—

He just really doesn’t want to think about this anymore, except he can’t seem to stop, and he’s only just barely managing to keep himself from crying. But he’s not going to cry. He’s not a wimp. He can handle this. He can.

Quackity moves, coming around Tubbo and leaning over behind Tommy. “C’mon, Tommy,” he says, and places a hand on his back, probably intending to guide him toward Ponk, and that’s where it goes wrong, because Tommy jerks, and then flinches away, scrambling back from everyone and everything, eyes suddenly wild as any wounded animal Fundy has ever seen. A rabbit in a snare, almost. He’s caught his fair share of rabbits.

“Stop,” Tommy says, “stop, don’t, don’t fucking—”

His chest is heaving, his breaths coming in large gulps. Everyone near him seems to freeze up, but it's most obvious in Tubbo, whose hand is still extended, like it's still pressing against Tommy's shoulder. There is a lot of blood on Tubbo's fingers, enough to drip to the grass. The grass doesn't need more blood on it. It's nauseating.

"Tommy," Quackity says, low and slow, like talking to a spooked animal. A rabbit. But Tommy's not a rabbit. Tommy's a cat, if anything. Loud and needy and making eye contact with you right before knocking all your shit off the table. "Tommy, you need to let Ponk have a look at that."

He can't tell if Tommy's listening. Tommy's back to staring at the place where Wilbur died.

"It wasn't supposed to go this way," Tommy says. "I thought I had it figured out. I thought—I thought this wouldn't *happen*."

"No one could have known what Dream was planning," Niki says.

"He's always planning something," Tommy says. "He's always, fucking, he's always planning, he's got little cogs turning in his brain and he makes all these plans and it never matters what you do, because, he's like a spider, he is, and he builds his webs all around you and makes you dance in them and fills up your head with cobwebs. And then you're stuck." He pauses. Takes another one of those shaking, shuddering breaths. "This was supposed to work. It was working."

"This wasn't your fault, Tommy," Eret says, quietly. "Please, let Ponk, or someone, at least —"

"I shouldn't have, I shouldn't have fought, that never, it never fucking does anything, he just comes back, and he's not gonna—" Tommy stops. And then, he scrambles to his feet, his motions twitchy and uncoordinated, and Niki and Quackity both leap forward to support him at the same time. Except, Tommy steps back and away from them, recovering some of his balance, like he doesn't still have a projectile sticking out of him. "No, I've gotta, I've gotta go, gotta go, big man shit. Got so much big man shit to do, and this, you know, this is just a flesh wound, and it's fine and I'll take care of it, but I just have to go right now, actually."

Tommy has plenty of stupid ideas, but that sounds more stupid than usual. Is he really going to deny that he needs some medical attention? But that's apparently the case, stupid or not. Ponk rises to their feet, head swiveling toward Tommy, and several others move as if to step forward, and Tubbo sits there with his hand outstretched, staring at Tommy as if he can keep him here with the sheer force of his gaze. But Tommy just backpedals some more. And then he's off like a shot, jogging, and then running, and it stuns everybody so much that for a second, nobody moves.

"What the hell was that?" Jack asks.

"He was probably," Quackity starts. Dismayed, frozen. "I mean, Wilbur's, like, his brother. Maybe he's in shock?"

Fundy wonders if he should speak up and remind everyone that Wilbur's his father. And that he's pretty sure he's also in shock. He doesn't do it, but the words linger, bitter, on his tongue.

"We have to go after him," Niki says, eyes only for where Tommy just disappeared from view. "He can't be alone. He's still *hurt*—"

"I'll go," Tubbo says. "I'll—I'll go, you guys handle the rest, but I'll go, I'll go make sure he doesn't—bleed to death."

He sounds rattled. Tubbo doesn't often sound rattled. He didn't even during the war, most of the time. He's good at that, good at keeping calm, staying level headed. But not right now. Nobody's calm. Nobody's level-headed. Wilbur's dead, and now Tommy's run off, and Fundy doesn't want Tommy hurt, but he also feels like maybe there's one of those things that they should be focusing on over the other.

"I'll come," Quackity says, but Tubbo shakes his head.

"No, you shouldn't—I've got this," he says. "I'll, I'll find him, I'll fix this."

"If you want to bring him my way, I'll go to my base," Ponk says. "I can look at that arm, if he'll let me. I won't even charge him. Not very much. Man, this is the worst."

"I'll try," Tubbo says. "If not, I—I know a thing or two about this stuff. I can—I'll find him."

And then, Tubbo's gone too, and most of the people here look like they really want to follow him, and also like they have no idea what to do at all, because none of them were prepared, and today was supposed to be so good, and nobody was ever supposed to die, and Wilbur least of all, and nobody's acting right, and everyone's off balance, wrongfooted and hesitant and struggling to know what course of action to take now that the impossible's just happened.

"Okay then," Quackity says. "Okay, alright, so we have to go find Wilbur. Make sure his respawn went right and everything. He'll be at his house, right? You guys stay here and hold down the fort, I'll go and get him." He starts off without waiting for an answer, and Jack follows him after a moment. Ponk watches them, and then gives the rest of them a nod, an apologetic gleam still in their eyes, and they head for the gates. Because they have a home to go to that's not here.

So does Fundy, now that he thinks about it.

"Okay," Niki whispers. "Right. It's all—it's all going to be fine." She glances between him and Eret. "They'll find him. We'll meet up back here. We'll figure out what to do." It's rare for Niki to sound so uncertain. She's soft-spoken, sure, but never so—thrown. Not even after the election. She was more angry about that than anything. Disappointed.

"Do you really think he'll be at his house?" Eret asks, and then looks to him. "Fundy?"

"What?" he says. He thinks that's the first word he's said in the past few minutes. "Um, I guess? I don't know why he wouldn't be?" Unless Eret thinks otherwise, though he doesn't know why she would. Unless it's something to do with the code, because it's clear enough

that she has something weird going on in that department, and now his mind is racing, trying to remember if there's stories connecting Herobrine and—and death, and respawn, and maybe respawn going wrong, and does Eret know something the rest of them don't?

"Oh," Niki says. "That may not be where his spawn is."

Oh. That—makes more sense. Yeah.

"That's what I was wondering," Eret says. She runs a hand through her hair. It's messy, sticking out in several directions. Her golden bracelets gleam in the light of the setting sun.

"He keeps a cot in his office," Niki says, gaining in confidence. "We should check there, too."

He didn't know that. Why would Wilbur have a cot in his office? Why would he want to *sleep* there? Why wouldn't he just go home? To—wherever he's staying at the moment. Fundy's not actually sure if he's got something beyond the first rudimentary structures they erected in L'Manberg. The van, maybe? Maybe he lives in the van, still. He feels like he should know this. But in any case, *why* would Wilbur feel the need to sleep in his office?

"You go," Eret says. "I'll stay here, in case he does make his way back. Or in case someone else does."

Her tone of voice at that sends shivers down Fundy's spine. There is something dark in it. Something old. Something that grates, in a way that Eret's voice is not supposed to grate. And her eyes are hidden behind her glasses, but he can feel them. Not on him, necessarily, but there. And he is imagining it, he knows, knows that his mind is playing tricks on him and filling in gaps that aren't there to be filled in the first place, but for a second, it's like the world itself cracks around her, turns itself to grey and becomes something dead and something long ago and something made of fractals of glass, the code itself breaking and the universe crying out.

He glances at Niki. Niki doesn't seem to have noticed.

"Okay," Niki says. "Please stay safe."

"I always do," Eret says, and she smiles. It's not entirely a nice smile, but in this, at least, Fundy feels secure in thinking that the not-niceness is not directed at him and Niki. Far from it.

"Are you coming, Fundy?" Niki says, and he jolts at being addressed.

"Yeah!" he says, too loudly. "I'm coming! Of course I'm coming!"

Because of course he's coming. What's the alternative? So he falls in step by Niki's side, her pace just shy of jogging as she sets off toward Wilbur's office, and he casts one last glance over to Eret. She's standing alone, jewelry glimmering and red cloak falling around her like some kind of armor, and she's not looking back at him. He doesn't know what she's looking at, if she's looking at anything at all.

For some reason, he thinks of a train.

The trip to Wilbur's office is silent, uneventful. Too silent, really, especially compared to—minutes ago. It can't only have been minutes. But it hasn't been longer, even though it feels like an eternity. It wasn't even an hour ago that they were doing karaoke. Dream was participating like he wasn't planning to throw a wrench in the festivities, ruin the day with his demands—even though honestly, he doesn't understand why Tommy couldn't have just given in. Especially since his refusal is what led to this in the first place. If he hadn't tried to fight instead, Wilbur would—

He probably shouldn't be angry at Tommy. But Tommy's so selfish, sometimes, selfish and impulsive and uncaring of others, and yet he gets to be the Vice President, gets to stand by Wilbur's side when he—

He grits his teeth. Drinks up Niki's silence like a balm, and the country's silence like a suture, and pretends that it works when all it does in the end is force his own words to die.

Niki yanks the office door open without knocking. For a moment, the silence remains, and his heart sinks; Wilbur's not here. Which probably just means that he's at wherever he's living at the moment, or, worst-case scenario, at world spawn. So, not a big deal, except he wanted him to be here.

And then, he registers the breathing.

“Wil,” Niki says, rounding the desk. He follows, a little more hesitantly, and—

Okay. Okay, Wilbur's here. He has eyes on him. He's not bleeding. He's not dead. There is a cot behind his desk that he's laid out on, and his chest is rising and falling, and if his face weren't all scrunched up, he'd look peaceful, like sleeping, a complete lack of pain. He's here, and he has two lives left, and it's all going to be okay. Today was a fluke. Today was a mistake. Today won't happen again, ever.

“Wil, can you hear me?” Niki says, and Wilbur doesn't answer. Doesn't even react, and Niki mumbles something under her breath before looking up at him. “Rough respawn, I think. Could you help me?”

He's not sure what she means until she gestures to the space next to her. She wants him to sit too. He's not sure why he's not already doing that, except maybe for the fact that despite his relief, despite the elation of seeing Wilbur whole and living, this whole thing still feels so very wrong, and he's not sure that Wilbur would want him here. Because lately, he hasn't been very sure that Wilbur wants him. Around.

He just wanted Wilbur to stop treating him like a kid. Wanted to prove that he could do something by himself. Wanted to be seen. And instead, he's been left with disappointed glances and cordial distance, and the worst part about it is that he can't even say that he doesn't deserve it. He should've at least made sure not to be caught. Been smarter.

But it stings, still, that even now, all Wilbur sees him as is an unruly child. Acting out for attention. Incapable of handling real responsibilities.

Niki gestures again, and he sits.

“Wilbur,” she says again, “can you hear me? Do you know where you are?” She jerks her head toward him, like she wants him to talk, so he swallows.

“Hey, Wil,” he says. “Um, that was kinda awful, but you’re good now. Nothing to worry about.”

Respawn can be difficult, sometimes, depending on circumstance and mindset and the world itself and about a dozen other factors. It can be hard to shake yourself loose from the void, to let your code stitch you back to physicality again, to bring yourself away from the edge of nothingness. And sometimes, your body remembers the wound even when it’s gone, like phantom pain, an echo. That’s probably what’s happening here. The burn of an arrow lingering.

As they speak, the wrinkles on Wilbur’s face slowly smooth out. Not entirely, but enough so that his expression is no longer so contorted. After a second, his eyes crack open.

“Niki?” Wilbur asks, voice hoarse.

“We’re right here, Wil,” Niki says. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m here also,” Fundy adds.

Wilbur sits up. It looks like it takes effort, and Niki reaches out to steady him, which he seems to ignore. He curls in on himself a bit, one hand raising to splay across his chest. There is an expression on his face that is—difficult to interpret. Something almost haunted, if he thought that Wilbur did haunted. Something that—something that almost reminds him of the way he feels whenever he looks at Eret lately, maybe, but that doesn’t really seem fair. Or make much sense.

“It was like a mirror,” Wilbur whispers.

“What was?” Niki asks.

Wilbur doesn’t say anything, just shakes his head and for a second, looks something approaching confused. Bewildered. And then, a look like realization, and wanting, and then it’s all gone, and he’s sitting up straighter, regarding both him and Niki in turn. Like everything else has been tucked away, stuffed into a box.

But that’s Wilbur. Fundy knew he wouldn’t let this faze him for long.

“I’m alright,” Wilbur says. “Sorry, that was just a bit—unexpected. Is everyone else alright?”

“No one else is badly hurt,” Niki says. “Except for Tommy, and he ran away, but Tubbo went after him.”

“Tommy ran?” Wilbur says, and the furrow between his eyebrows that always indicates concern appears. “Ran *where*? He can’t leave L’Manberg right now, Niki, that’s not safe for him, not after what just happened. Has there been word, has Tubbo found him?”

Ah. Tommy. Of course, the first question he asks is about Tommy.

Niki replies, but he can't hear her, not over the slowly growing ringing in his ears. This is it, then. Status quo. Business like usual. He doesn't know why he expected anything different. But here they are, Wilbur asking questions to Niki and not to him, Wilbur calm and cool and collected and impossible to reach, to please, to be noticed by. Wilbur asking after *Tommy*, making sure *Tommy's* alright, even though he wants nothing more than for Wilbur to turn to him, to check on him, to say *hey, are you okay, that was probably pretty scary for you*, to which he'd say, *yeah, of course, I can handle it, but I'm really glad you're all good*, and then Wilbur would say, *I always knew I could count on you, you did a good job out there*, and he'd —

But that's all a stupid fantasy. And at the end of the day, he knows where he falls on Wilbur's list of priorities.

Behind Tommy, that's for sure.

"I don't know," Niki says. "We split up. Most of us came to find you. Quackity and Jack went to check the van, and Eret stayed back to make sure nothing else happened. I'm sure Tubbo will find Tommy soon."

"Right," Wilbur says. "Right, that sounds—alright, we need everyone together. It won't be safe to be out and about alone. Not for any of us. We'll find safety in numbers."

"Is there going to be a war?" Niki asks.

"Maybe," Wilbur says. "I hope not. But it might be inevitable after this. Dream certainly can't go unanswered for what he did to Tommy, even if it was during a formal duel. We agreed on no excessive force. We *agreed*. And he—" He cuts himself off, scrubbing a hand down his face. "I shouldn't have let it go forward. I was foolish enough to believe he'd keep his word, and now you're all in danger."

"It's Dream's fault, not yours," Niki says.

He really feels as though it's at least a little bit Tommy's, too. But of course she's not going to say that. And Wilbur wouldn't hear it even if she did. There's no point.

"Right," Wilbur says. He shifts, and then moves to get to his feet, but he winces through the effort, settling back on his haunches. Lingering exhaustion, probably. Rough respawns suck. "I may need another moment."

"That's alright," Niki says, and he sees his opportunity.

"Yeah, you stay here," he jumps in, and does not wilt underneath Wilbur's sudden gaze. Not that he wants to. "I'll go and—I'll go make sure that nothing else is going on! Check in with Eret and everything. See if Tommy's back yet. All of that stuff! You can count on me."

"Alright," Wilbur says. There's a little furrow in his brow. "Thank you, Fundy."

That warms him. Not enough to shake off the rest of it, the dismay and the fear and the still-growing resentment, the niggling thought of *why does Tommy get so much attention when all he does is make trouble and I don't make trouble so why won't you look at me instead*. But there is warmth. He holds onto it. Grins at Wilbur even though he doesn't much feel like grinning, and then he leaves him and Niki to—to it. To whatever it is. Getting Wilbur back on his feet. Talking about this mess.

But honestly, they're probably glad of an excuse to get rid of him. He's always kept out of the most important conversations. This one is no different.

Back to Eret, then. It doesn't take very long; she's not exactly where they left her, but she's still close. She's moved further away from the stage, and the reason for that is evident. Tubbo is back, and with him, Tommy. Tommy looks closed-off, his whole posture bristling, defensive, and he's *still* bleeding from his shoulder. But the arrow is gone, and Tubbo is hovering, and Eret is fussing over him. Fundy can't hear what they're all saying. None of them have noticed him.

He waits to see if they will. No one does.

He scuffs his foot against the grass. He's standing in the spot where Wilbur died. The blood is soaking into the ground, as if the grass itself is a sponge, or as if something is below the surface sucking it up. Not all of it, though; some of the grass still shines a bright red, almost like it's growing that way. He stares at it, his head filling with a buzzing static.

It's because Wilbur died here. He's still having a little bit of trouble with that.

Eret's still not noticing him. Tubbo and Tommy aren't noticing him. A large part of him wants to march over and give Tommy a little piece of his mind, but another part of him insists that that would be a bad idea, and he doesn't even particularly want anyone's attention right now *anyway*, so he's going to take a walk. Clear his head.

Forget about the fact that it's probably really dangerous to go outside of L'Manberg right now. Wilbur said as much, but that was in relation to Tommy, because of course it was. Fundy's sure he'll be fine. He's armed and armored. He'll go for a walk, check out other areas, see if Dream's got anything else planned, and he'll bring the information back to Wilbur. And he'll stop by his house, too. He's proud of his house.

No one notices him slip out of the gate. No one is waiting on the other side. There's no ambush, as he'd half expected there to be. No Dream lying in wait, mask a malicious grin. No Sapnap, axe flashing, no George, casual and ambivalent in his violence. No Punz, arrow knocked on the string, prepared to take another life just like he took Wilbur's.

The server is silent.

The server isn't silent, of course. There is wind in the trees and birds chirping somewhere else and his footsteps crunch against the ground, and the server isn't silent. And yet, something about it makes him think that everything's been paused, somehow. That something's been triggered, and now the world itself is leaning forward in anticipation.

He passes by spawn, just to have a look around. Nothing seems out of the ordinary, except for a scrap of paper lying on the ground that reads *ened on page 13*? It's in an unfamiliar handwriting, and something about the code feels off, foreign, so he tucks it away for later, just in case. But other than that, there's nothing, and eventually, he makes it to his house. His house, and the dark obsidian field that rests just beyond his doors.

He grits his teeth.

So much trouble, and all because Tommy didn't want to remove it. So much trouble, and Wilbur literally *died*, and all for Tommy's stupid prank on Punz. It's not even a good prank. It's just a little big ugly. So what, exactly, was the point of any of this at all?

There is a murmur in the back of his mind. Urging him forward. Justifying all of the resentment that's boiling in him.

He could do something about this. He could take it down. And then maybe, Dream would stop being an asshole toward L'Manberg. Maybe there wouldn't have to be another war. Maybe Tommy would finally stop causing problems, for once. He could start by his house, dig a little pathway, start from the bottom up so that no one would see him doing it and interrupt him, and then he could head home later with nobody the wiser. And then he could tell Wilbur, and Wilbur would appreciate his efforts.

The murmur in the back of his mind likes this plan.

So, he grabs a shovel and a pickaxe, and he begins to dig.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sure there won't be consequences for this.

Thank you all so much for the kudos and comments, it really makes my day!! And my life's been a bit of a mess lately, so that goes double rn tbh. Love y'all <3

[My tumblr](#)

Next up, Chapter Seventeen: In which Tubbo tries very hard to prevent Tommy from doing something stupid, and in his failure to do that, decides he should at least join in on the stupidity. And slowly, an impossible picture is becoming a little more clear.

Tubbo III

Chapter Notes

No content warnings that aren't in the tags, except for implied allusions to c!Dream's abuse of c!Tommy in the previous timeline.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He's waiting for the other shoe to drop.

It's impossible for him not to, these days. And he knows that if he said it out loud, people would either think he's crazy or they'd misinterpret what he means. He's not talking about Dream. And he's not talking about what happened today, either. Dream is—a shoe, for sure, and he's dropped, and he's probably going to drop again, because he feels like Dream owns an unreasonable amount of shoes and has an unreasonable liking for dropping them, to round out that metaphor, but. Not what he's waiting for. Not what has him most on edge. Which is a little bit fucked up, frankly.

He's talking about Tommy.

He finds Tommy. He talks him down from—whatever that was. He barely knows. Barely remembers what he says. Barely remembers what Tommy says, over the way his heart roars in his ears, the way his eyes are drawn again and again to the blood sheeting from Tommy's shoulder and the way Tommy is ignoring it like it isn't anything at all.

He gets Tommy back to everyone else. To Eret, who's still waiting, whose presence seems to help. To everyone else, when they return, Jack and Quackity empty-handed and Niki and Wilbur a moment later, Wilbur himself standing tall even if he's moving gingerly, his eyes shadowed. Finally, Tommy lets himself be treated, if only after all but throwing himself at Wilbur, checking him over as if he's expecting there to be lingering signs of his death, demanding to know whether he's alright while at the same time Wilbur tries to ask Tommy the same thing. But then, that's just how those two are.

They make a few plans. They set a watch. Fundy's out late, which clearly worries Wilbur, but Fundy can handle himself. And they can hardly stop him from going to stay in his own house, even if Wilbur would obviously prefer otherwise.

Tubbo waits for the other shoe to drop.

It doesn't take long.

Night sets in well and truly. Wilbur's out there on the wall somewhere, standing guard; he'd insisted, even if he probably should be resting after what, according to Niki's hushed whisper,

was a relatively rough respawn. Jack's up there too, just in case. And the darkness gets deeper, and Tubbo stays awake, so he hears it when Tommy goes to sneak out.

He wonders if this is exactly how Tommy did it those weeks and months ago. When Tommy went to give up the discs for L'Manberg. When he was too tired and confused to question what Tommy was doing, or to even begin to figure out what was going on.

He's still tired. He's still confused. He still has no idea what's happening. No idea why sometimes he looks at Tommy and sees—

But that's the thing. He doesn't know. And for all that Tommy was letting him in, letting him a little closer, he still only knows that *something* is terribly wrong, and feels no closer to the *what*.

He is getting accustomed to the new Tommy, though. Which means he's able to guess that the other shoe's going to drop, somehow. And he's right.

As soon as he hears Tommy's footsteps pass by his door, he slips out of bed and follows him.

He's not trying to be particularly subtle about it, so he's not surprised when Tommy turns, just under the shadow of the walls, and sees him.

"Tubbo," Tommy says, voice a quiet croak. "Tubbo, what the—what the fuck are you doing?"

"Following you," he supplies, with a glance up at the battlements. There's no one at this exact spot right now. They've got a good shot at being able to sneak out, if need be. It might be getting back in that proves to be an issue. But maybe Tommy's thought of that. Maybe Tommy does this more often than he thought. It would hardly surprise him, at this point.

"The hell you are," Tommy says. He, too, casts a wary glance at the wall, as if expecting Wilbur to appear from nowhere to demand they go back to bed. Which, honestly, Tubbo is sort of hoping for. "Go back home, Tubbo. You can't come."

"I'm not letting you go off by yourself," he answers, plainly, and lets his gaze drift to the bandages still peeking out from under Tommy's shirt. The use of a couple of pots means that the wound itself is almost fully healed, the bandages more a precaution than anything, but that doesn't mean he's forgotten that not even six hours ago, he had Tommy's blood all over his hands in the most literal sense possible.

And also the figurative sense. Because Tommy stepped in the way of an arrow aimed at him. He doesn't think he's quite processed that yet. Maybe he's not going to. Maybe he's just going to be angry about it.

"You don't get a fucking say," Tommy hisses. "I've got something I need to do. Just, just fuck off, I mean it."

"Yeah, well, I mean it too," he says. "Either you let me come with you, or I shout really loud, and Wilbur and Jack will know that you're trying to sneak off at night." Wilbur's the only

name that's really a threat. Jack would care, of course, but Tommy doesn't look at Jack like Tommy looks at Wilbur. Even if the way Tommy looks at Wilbur has changed a little bit, too, in recent days.

It doesn't matter right now. The threat's still effective.

Tommy glares at him. He glares right back, to show that he means business.

"Fine," Tommy says eventually, sounding a little choked. "Fine. But you have to—you have to stay close to me, and if I tell you to go, or, or something, you have to, and you can't let him get you, alright? This isn't—this is dead serious. I don't want you to—but *I* have to, so if you're coming, that means you have to let me take the lead, and you let me go in front."

"Now who's clingy?" he says, mostly to cover up his unease.

Judging by the words and tone, he thinks he can guess what Tommy's going to go see. Or rather, who. Which makes it all the more important that he not go alone. Which makes it all the more important that Tubbo stay angry, instead of something else. Like frightened.

Tommy lets out a huff of breath, the familiar irritation comforting.

"Shut the fuck up and stay close, Tubs," he says, and together, they creep out from the safety of L'Manberg, climbing over the walls when Jack's—and it is Jack, guarding this side, because no offense to him of course but Wilbur would be infinitely harder to get past—back is turned. And then into the forest, or what's left of it, and down a familiar route, and Tubbo does what Tommy insists and stays close.

Probably not for the reasons that Tommy wants, but he's not about to say so.

This whole thing is a choice between two evils. The first option is to let Tommy go alone, trust that he knows what he's doing and that he'll come back. Which, considering today, Tubbo is not inclined to do. But then there's the other option, where he goes, like he's doing, and risks Tommy getting hurt because of him. Risks being used against Tommy. Again. Which puts a sour taste in his mouth.

Out of the two evils, he knows which one is lesser. That's why he's here.

So he just has to make sure he doesn't let it happen again. He still flounders, still struggles to know exactly what help he can give Tommy when Tommy himself barely tells him anything, so he'll just have to be better. Stronger.

It's been a good while since he's been to Dream's base. But he still remembers the way. And so does Tommy.

They enter to an argument of some kind, Tommy drawing up short. Tubbo stops too, not needing Tommy's outstretched hand to tell him not to move forward. They've walked in on something. Potentially a bad situation. But honestly, any situation where they're here and not at home is a bad situation. Bad is relative.

“—aying it was uncalled for,” Sapnap is saying, loud and angry. There’s a lot of flames crackling in here, and not just from torches; sparks fly with every word that leaves Sapnap’s mouth. They’re gathered around a table—Dream, George, Sapnap, Punz. There’s a few papers between the lot of them—blueprints? plans?—but the surface is otherwise clear. Dream and Punz are wearing armor, everything but helmets, and George and Sapnap are not. George looks bored. Punz—well, it’s always hard to read Punz, and at the moment, Tubbo looks at him and sees Wilbur writhing on the ground, so that doesn’t offer much insight. Sapnap is clearly upset about something.

Dream’s wearing the mask. It fully covers his face. But his posture is relaxed.

“Okay,” Dream says, “I mean, I get it, Sapnap, I get what you’re saying. It escalated, and you’re upset about that. But I didn’t know that it was gonna go that far. How was I supposed to know Tommy wouldn’t be reasonable? I mean, come on, it’s just some obsidian. But no, he refused, and everything spiraled from there, and I don’t see how that’s my fault.”

“Are you honestly trying to tell me you weren’t planning it?” Sapnap demands. Sparks again. A crackle, like a forest fire. “I know you, Dream. You can’t just lie to my face. And look, if you—if you wanted to go to war with L’Manberg again, then fine, whatever, but why couldn’t you just say that? Why go through all of—and during a festival? That they invited us all to? That wasn’t cool, man, and you know it. You have to know it.”

Dream makes a sharp gesture. Tommy, standing just a little bit in front of him, flinches, shoulders hunching. Tubbo wonders if Tommy would accept it if he grabbed his hand, or if he wants to remind Tommy that he’s here at all.

“It doesn’t matter,” Dream says. “It’s done, it’s over, there’s nothing we can do about it now. Whether you like it or not, they’re gonna come after us.”

“Yeah, because we *killed* somebody,” Sapnap says. “It’s a three-life server, dude, it’s not like there’s not consequences—”

“Wilbur got in the way,” Punz says quietly. “He should’ve known better than to involve himself in a fight he couldn’t handle.”

“We’ve been talking about this for ages,” George cuts in. “Can’t we just go and blow them up or something? I don’t see the point in going in circles over and over again.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Dream says. “You’ve gotta stay with me on this one. And I know you will, because I trust you, Sapnap. But we’ve got to stick together, because we *are* going to war again. And this time, we need to—”

Tommy steps forward, and Tubbo regrets not grabbing his hand when he could.

“No you’re not,” Tommy says, and there is a loud crackle, the *shing* of several drawn swords, and the eyes of the Dream Team are on them. Punz’s eyebrows have climbed up his face, and even George looks a little surprised. Sapnap, for some reason, looks vaguely ill. But maybe the guy is growing morals or something. Tubbo doesn’t know; it’s none of his business.

For a moment, no one moves.

“Tommy,” Dream says, and then a full two seconds later, “Tubbo. What brings you two here?”

The threat is implicit, and Tubbo realizes he didn’t think to grab his armor. He’s fallen out of the habit of getting it when he gets out of bed. It was peacetime. And there’s no armor in L’Manberg. L’Manberg is safe and free.

But he does have his sword. And an axe. He knows how to use both. He’s just got to figure out a way to get both himself and Tommy out of here, if it comes down to it. He’d be perfectly willing to serve as a distraction while Tommy escaped, but he knows better than to think that Tommy would go for it. If that happened, Tommy would stay, and Tommy would get hurt. Because of him. Again. So that makes the whole idea rather pointless.

“Well, it’s not because I like looking at your ugly mug,” Tommy says. A second later, he tacks on, “Bitch.”

Dream makes a gesture. After a moment of hesitation, Sapnap comes round the table, and then positions himself behind them. At the exit. Cutting them off. Shit. He should’ve figured they would do that.

“So get to the point,” Punz draws. “Unless you’ve changed your mind, and you’re gonna clean up my place after all.”

“It’s not your place, and you said you were fucking fine with it,” Tommy says, “so you’re a liar and a pussy and I hate you.”

“Are we gonna just let him come in here and talk to us like that?” George asks.

“No,” Dream says. “No, we’re not. I’ll tell you what, Tommy, because I’m feeling nice, I’ll let you guys leave right now. Or, you can stay here, and we can talk about—whatever it is you wanna talk about, I don’t know, and then I’ll explain exactly what I want L’Manberg to do, and either you agree to go along with it, or we’ll kill you. Simple as that.”

Tommy breathes in. And out. Shuddering.

“No,” he says, and his voice wavers. “No, you’re not going to. And I’m gonna tell you why.”

“Okay, sure,” Dream says. “Why? Who’s gonna stop me?”

Me, Tubbo almost, *almost* says. It’s on the tip of his tongue. But he’s got a feeling, and the feeling is telling him to stay quiet. That it’ll be better if everyone sort of forgets he’s here. Better for Tommy, and better for him. Because maybe someone’s about to let something slip, and people just love to underestimate him.

“I mean, I guess no one, really,” Tommy says. “We’d beat you up, but you’d probably be able to four-vee-two us. But then I’ll never ever tell you what I know.”

Dream tilts his head. “What you know,” he repeats. “What could you possibly know that you think I’d be interested in?”

“Oh, I know so much,” Tommy says. “So much information. If I told you all of it, it would blow your puny little mind. But you know, there’s rather a lot I can’t tell you, because I know you, and I know you’re dumb and terrible, so if I tell you too much, you’ll go poking around and that will end so very not well at all.”

Dream leans forward. Just slightly. Imperceptibly. He’s interested. Maybe despite himself, or maybe he can’t even tell. But he’s interested. And Tommy, Tubbo realizes all of a sudden, is playing him like a fiddle. If the fiddle player was standing on the edge of a cliff, unable to move back.

“Poke around?” Dream asks. “Poke around where?”

“See, I just said that I wasn’t going to tell you that,” Tommy says.

“Okay, well, in that case, I don’t see why what you have to say is useful—”

“Keep going like this, and you die, Dream,” Tommy says.

For a moment, that shuts him up. Behind them, Tubbo hears Sapnap hold his breath for a moment, before exhaling unsteadily. It’s a bit odd, since Sapnap is generally pretty hard to shake up, but he seemed a bit unstable to begin with. And Tubbo starts to wonder if maybe that could give them an advantage. Maybe he could wheel around, try to incapacitate him in one motion, and then he and Tommy could scramble away and manage to escape before everyone else recovered from their shock.

It’s not likely, maybe, but it could be worth a shot.

“Is that a threat?” George asks. Punz shifts, posture deceptively laid back. “That’s a threat, right? Can we kill them now?”

“It’s not a threat,” Tommy says. “I don’t—look, Dream, and I am being completely honest here, I would like it very much if you simply went away and I never, ever had to see you again. So it’s not a threat. I’m not threatening you, even though if you touch Tubbo or Wilbur or anyone else I will simply come for your head, and I’ll kill you. It’s just—it’s a fact. Keep going like this, and you die.”

“Yeah?” Dream says. “And why is that?”

“There’s worse monsters out there than you, Dream,” Tommy says, and Dream stills.

“You’ve told me that before,” Dream says. “I’m not a monster, and there’s no one around more powerful than me.”

“I can name five people off the top of my head who are more powerful than you,” Tommy says. “But that’s not even my point. There’s monsters and there’s monsters, and maybe one’s not exactly worse than the other but I can still tell you which one wins.”

“Okay, literally what are you even talking about,” George says. “He’s not making any sense. Hey, Tubbo, how about you talk to us? Translate, maybe? Your stupid friend’s talking nonsense.”

He would, if he knew where Tommy was going with this, literally at all. So instead, he just says, “I think you should listen to him, George,” and tries not to feel irritated when Tommy shifts a little, to be even more in front of him. He really, really wishes Tommy wouldn’t do that, because it almost feels as though Tommy’s forgotten that he can take care of himself. And that he doesn’t want Tommy to get hurt for his sake.

“Your power’s worth shit,” Tommy says. “You and your plans and your b—I mean, your knowledge and what have you, that’s all useless. Because where it ends up is, is one last try to get some kind of power over m—over this server, and it doesn’t even work because you die right in the middle of it. You die, and you’re all alone except for people that hate you, because you’ve chased everyone who loved you away by being such a shit person. And even the people who hate you don’t have time to bury your body, so you’re food for the vines. You get it? That’s where you’ll be. Dying alone and weak. All because you decide you’re better off without friends.”

Dream is silent. Tubbo wishes he’d move the mask, if only above his mouth; he used to wear it further up on his face, back when things were good between them and the fight didn’t feel entirely serious. As things stand, he can’t tell how Dream’s reacting. And he himself doesn’t know how to react.

Tommy sounds so sure, is the thing. More sure than bluster, or guesswork.

“I know how it ends, Dream,” Tommy says. “You’re not going to like how it ends.”

“Okay,” Dream says at length. “Say you’re even—say literally any of what you just said makes sense. Let’s just—pretend you’re not talking nonsense right now. Say that’s the case, why should I even believe you? What’s to stop me from taking a life from you and Tubbo right here, right now? You haven’t convinced me not to.”

He’ll have an axe in his hand in less than a second. He could go for Sapnap, or, worst comes to worst, for Dream if Dream goes for Tommy. But that leaves Punz and George to contend with, and Punz will do whatever Dream tells him, and George generally just wants a bit of chaos.

Something bumps the back of his foot. He stiffens.

“I’ll tell you why,” Tommy says. “If you kill Tubbo, I’ll kill you. And if you kill me, then—I mean, Dream. This is—you want war, I know you want war, we all know you fucking want war, because you can’t fucking let it alone. But if there’s war, either we beat you, or you beat us, and either way, maybe you get your, your happy little server, you get all your control, but you’ll never, ever get to know—” Tommy stops. Takes a breath. “You’ll never get to know what’s going on with me, yeah? Why I’m changing the rules. What else I know. You’ll never get any of that, and if you can’t get it, you can’t control it, and you hate that. You hate not knowing shit. And if you start a war now, I’ll die before I let you know any of it. So you can’t—you won’t have that. You’ll never have it. Or—or *me*.”

What the *fuck* is this tactic? Nausea rises in the back of his throat at the way Tommy just seems to—offer himself up so easily. Offer himself, or dangle himself out on a string, or dangle—

Something. Something, and Tubbo hasn't been told what, and still hasn't managed to figure it out.

He looks down and behind him, hoping that it's subtle enough that no one really notices. Odds are good; people underestimate him, and he likes it that way.

There's a pair of enderpearls resting on the floor just behind him. Slowly, his gaze travels up, and meets Sapnap's.

Sapnap looks back. There are sparks at his fingertips, but not in his eyes.

"You're banking a lot on the idea that I want to know," Dream says. "That I even care."

"You do," Tommy says.

Slowly, Tubbo bends over and picks up the pearls, slipping them into his inventory. He holds eye contact with Sapnap for just another second, and then faces forward again, scanning Punz and George. George is staring at Tommy, but Punz is looking at him, so he sets his jaw. A challenge.

Punz killed Wilbur. The whole thing was Dream's fault in the first place, but Punz killed Wilbur. And Wilbur's alright now, but a death is a death, and he doesn't consider himself an eye for an eye kind of person, but he's not going to back down, either.

Punz raises an eyebrow. But he doesn't say anything. Maybe he's not being paid enough to.

"Okay," Dream says, "but what's in it for me? I just get to know what you know? That's not a whole lot."

"Oh, you'll know what I know," Tommy says. "But see, the thing is that it *is* a whole lot. You leave L'Manberg alone, and you'll know what I know someday, and maybe you'll even live. You'd like that, wouldn't you? And then—I mean, then you can do whatever you want, really."

There is a ghost in Tommy's voice. A phantom of—that something, again. Tommy won't tell him what it is. He's beginning to understand that he never will. Not just through asking. If he wants to know, he's going to have to put the pieces together himself, and that's hard, because he has some of them already but none of them fit in a way that forms a picture.

It has to do with the way his voice shakes when he talks to Dream, and the way he knows exactly how to get what he wants from him at the same time. It has to do with the way Tommy will flinch one second and be shouting the next, and the way he'll look at common, everyday things like they're the worst shock he's received in his life. It has to do with the way he went so blank when Wilbur died. It has to do with the way he throws himself in front

of every danger like the world will end if he doesn't, if he so much as sees anyone else get hurt in front of him.

And it has to do with that night. Tubbo is sure of it. That night, all those weeks ago.

The night everything changed.

"You sure this is how you wanna do it, Tommy?" Dream asks.

"Stop pretending that you're not interested," Tommy says. "I know you're fucking interested. And you know if you go along with it now, you can do whatever the fuck you want later." He pauses. "And it's not really about the knowing, is it? And you know that, too."

There's a pause.

"I mean," Dream says, "I can do whatever the fuck I want right now."

"Dream," Sapnap says, quietly, "come on."

"But sure," Dream says, easily as breathing. "That'd save me some trouble. It's not like I want to go to war. You're the one who turned that whole thing into a big deal. So if you're saying L'Manberg isn't gonna try to come after us, then sure, I'll go along."

Dream is lying, and everyone in the room knows it. Dream is lying, and Dream wants nothing more than to wage war, than to find the excuse that he can use to get rid of L'Manberg once and for all, to end up on top, holding all the cards, discs and server and all. But for some reason, he's putting that aside for the moment, on the hope of learning about Tommy's—something.

Tubbo's not really sure what that means. But it scares him.

"Okay," Tommy says, and breathes out. Still shaky. "Okay, great. Fine. No war. Wilbur'll agree. He's still—he hasn't—he still doesn't want to fight. He's still—yeah. No war. And sometime I'll—okay, it's been really good talking to you, Dream. Should also tell you I've invited someone else to the server, don't fucking go after him or some shit when he gets here, he's fine. Um, we're gonna go."

"Wait," Dream says. "What? Only I can let people on the server."

"Went around you, dickhead," Tommy says, backing up a step. His hands are twitching at his sides, like he wants a weapon. Or like he just wants to raise them, to put them between him and Dream. "Callahan's not a little bitch. Like you."

"What?" Dream is sputtering, now, and Tubbo doesn't have to see behind the mask to see his indignation. And Dream takes a step forward, his own hand coming up, though empty for now, and Tommy takes a full three steps backward, almost tripping over himself, and it's definitely time for them to go.

So he steps forward, finally, meeting Tommy's eyes—and *Prime*, he looks awful, all shocked and anxious and not all there at all—and presses an enderpearl into his hand.

It's a blink of an eye to throw them. He's got good aim, and Tommy does, too. Dream's shout rings in his ears, and there is one last sight of Sapnap stepping aside to let the pearls fly out, and then Dream striding forward, but then there's the familiar tilt and lurch and they're standing in the grass, night sky twinkling above them.

He grabs Tommy's hand. And he runs.

He doesn't stop until they're within sight of L'Manberg. There's a vague silhouette on the wall; Wilbur, he thinks, based on the height and the hair. They're still too far away to be spotted unless they make some effort to be seen, but they're safe. Safer. Within a stone's throw of home, at the very least.

Tommy's wheezing for breath. Tubbo waits for him to catch it. It takes longer than it should.

"So," he says, once he thinks Tommy's listening to him. "What the hell was that, then?"

"What do you mean?" Tommy says. "Just a chat. I told you, I didn't need you to come."

There is too much to say. There is the fact that Tommy doesn't want L'Manberg to go to war, even after what happened to Wilbur, which means—it has to be because of that something again, because it doesn't make any sense. There is the fact that whatever happened in there, Tommy knew exactly how to get Dream to do what he wanted. There is the fact that Tommy knows something—that *something*. He should ask what it is, and how he knows it, and why it's making him act this way, and why can't he just *tell* him so that he can help, but he doesn't. He doesn't ask.

Because Tommy won't tell him. And all of the other questions get stuck in his throat, so what comes out is, "You invited someone else to the server? That's what you were talking to Callahan about?"

Tommy visibly relaxes. He tries not to feel hurt. He tries very hard.

"Yeah," Tommy says. "Just a guy. Kind of a builder, think he might come in handy. No big deal."

The thing about that is that he's fairly sure that everything Tommy's done is a big deal. Bigger than he thought. Because Tommy is working toward something, that is increasingly apparent. And Tommy knows something, or has seen something, or—

Tommy's not going to let him in. He thought he would. He hoped he would. He thought they were getting somewhere, even, that Tommy would stop trying to take everything on his shoulders. But either the festival set them back, or Tommy's been lying to him all along, and he doesn't know which is worse.

"Okay," he says, and it tastes like ashes.

"Okay," Tommy answers. "Good move, with the, uh, the pearls there."

"Thanks," he says.

“C’mon,” Tommy says. “Let’s get back in.”

“Right,” he says. “Are we—telling Wilbur that war might not be happening, or—?”

Tommy has, he thinks, forgotten about the fact that Wilbur might very well want to go to war, at this point, after what Dream did to Tommy. But Tommy doesn’t think about stuff like that. Tommy doesn’t seem to realize that he affects the people around him, and Tubbo doesn’t know what to do to make him understand.

Tommy grimaces. “We’ll do it in the morning,” he says. “Less likely for him to get all pissy at us, that way.”

He nods, mute. They creep back into L’Manberg the same way they left, sneaking back over to Jack Manifold’s side of the walls and clambering over when he’s looking the other way. It’s not quite fair to Jack, really; it’s just that they’re very good at getting in and out of places unseen, when they want to be. Mischief relies on not getting caught. He misses the days when they only used these skills for mischief.

They go back home. Tommy moves as if to go back to his own room, his own bed; his room here, that is, and not the one in the Embassy, in his home in the hill, because at least he has enough sense to know he should not be sleeping outside of L’Manberg right now.

There’s so much unsaid. There’s so much that’s going to keep on being unsaid, because Tommy’s not going to tell him any thing at all. If he wants to know, he has to put the pieces together. If he wants to know, he’s on his own. He’s finally come to that understanding, and it feels a bit like sinking and a little like drowning and a little like he never had air at all.

And Tommy is looking at him in a way that he barely recognizes. Like there’s a perfect stranger behind his eyes.

So he reaches out, and grabs Tommy’s sleeve. Gently.

“Tommy?” he asks, and falters. “You are—I mean, you are *Tommy*, aren’t you?”

Even he’s not sure what he means by that. But Tommy’s expression falls into a momentary look of complete devastation before smoothing over again, blank as can be.

“Course I am,” Tommy says. “Who the fuck else would I be?”

Someone I can’t reach, Tubbo doesn’t say.

“I dunno,” he says. “You’re just being weird, ‘s all. Goodnight, Tommy.”

He goes into his room, shuts the door. Waits there, as Tommy stands still, breathing. It’s a long time before he hears his footsteps retreating down the hallway, and then the distant sound of a shutting door. He gives it another few seconds, and then a minute, and then two. And then, as silently as he can, he opens his door, and creeps back out again.

He goes to find Wilbur.

Wilbur looks tired, but that's to be expected; he probably shouldn't be on the watch at all tonight, but there was no one about to tell him no. Wilbur cares, so much, and sometimes, Tubbo thinks he cares a little too much. He could stand to delegate a little more, maybe. But despite it all, despite the exhaustion, Wilbur is straight-backed and alert, someone that Tubbo knows he can go to with anything, when he can't go to Tommy. And when it's about Tommy.

And Tommy didn't explicitly tell him to not go tell Wilbur. Not this time.

"You might want to know that Tommy went to talk to Dream tonight," he starts, and as Wilbur wheels on him, face going even paler in the dim moonlight, he goes on, spilling everything, even a lot of his own doubts, in hopes that Wilbur might know what to do with them. Because he's tried, and for a while, he thought they were getting close, that Tommy would trust him with the *something*, but tonight made it obvious that that's not going to happen. So maybe he can pass it off to Wilbur again. Or they can be a tag team.

Or maybe Wilbur will at least have an idea. Wilbur always seems to have an idea. Wilbur knows what he's doing better than any of the rest of them.

"Fuck," Wilbur says, when he's finished.

"Yeah," he agrees.

"Okay," Wilbur says, "okay, you're—you're both *alright*, though? You didn't get hurt?"

There is real fear in his tone. Tubbo is quick to nod.

"Yeah, we got out," he says. "Sapnap seemed to sort of be on our side."

Wilbur shakes his head, huffing out a disbelieving breath. "I'm going to strangle him," he mutters. "What the fuck was he—and you didn't stop him?"

He winces. "I didn't think I could," he says. "Not forever. Sorry, boss man."

"No, no, you're right," Wilbur says, "you're right, of course. Once Tommy gets an idea in his head—" He breaks off, shaking his head again. His eyes are shadowed, distant, and for a second, they flick to the right. But there's nothing there. "I wish neither of you had gone, but you did the right thing, giving him some fucking backup. I'm glad he wasn't being a dumbass by himself, at least. Fuck."

"What do we do, Wilbur?" he asks. "I thought—I mean, I thought we were getting somewhere. But the festival—I dunno, I can't even tell what he's thinking, most of the time."

"We'll keep watch," Wilbur says. "You and me, we'll keep watch. If he's not gonna talk about it—but he has to, doesn't he? You said he said to Dream—" He frowns, looking vaguely ill. "Obviously, that's not good. Dream—Dream can, with all due respect, which is none, suck it. But—he has to say something eventually. This can't go on forever. And it's—it's Tommy, you know, he can't sit on something indefinitely. So we keep watch, and when we finally figure it out, we'll be ready for—whatever he needs. Or whatever we need to do. You and I, we're together on this."

He nods. “Together,” he agrees. It’s not exactly a concrete plan. But there’s something reassuring in it anyway, knowing that Wilbur is still behind him.

“And something else, Tubbo,” Wilbur says, voice suddenly growing stronger, more sure, a little more commanding. “Whether there’s war or not, times are about to be a little more difficult. I’d like to keep you close. Show you some of the ropes, if you will. I think our nation could benefit from you taking a bit more of a central role. Can I count on you?”

He isn’t entirely sure what Wilbur’s asking of him, but he nods.

“Of course, boss man,” he says, and hesitates. “Though isn’t that the sort of thing that you do with a vice president?”

Wilbur grimaces, and he doesn’t have to say anything for Tubbo to read the reluctance, and the reason why. They’ve just had a whole discussion about it, so it was a stupid question, really. Whatever responsibility Wilbur’s about to ask him to take on, Tommy’s in no place to handle it. Not that he would tell Tommy as much. But facts are facts. And Tommy, at the moment, is—

Something. Something unspoken. But something there, and something real, and something that neither he nor Wilbur have any idea how to help. Something.

“You can count on me,” he says. “Teach me your ways.”

Wilbur smiles at him. He looks a little tired. But he’s got reason for it.

“Thank you,” he says. “I’m glad to hear it.”

It’s nice to be trusted. Nice to have faith placed in him. Tommy hasn’t done that in a long time. And outside of L’Manberg, the shadows are growing deeper.

He stays on the wall for a little while longer before going to bed. He and Wilbur don’t speak much more, just watch. And there’s nothing at all to see, which is the best case scenario. Maybe Dream will keep to his word, no matter what future problems that will bring. Maybe Tommy will get what he wants, or what he needs, and everything will go back to normal again. Maybe everything will be alright in the end.

But in the darkness, the silence and the stillness feel like another shoe. Somewhere out there, waiting to drop.

Chapter End Notes

Remember when Tommy was talking to Callahan during the festival? :D

c!Callahan in this fic is basically a cryptid with funky server powers and a willingness to cause chaos when he thinks it might be fun. And inviting someone else to the server

sounds like fun. I didn't have room to get into any of my lore for how servers function, but essentially, while c!Dream functions as the server admin and owner, c!Callahan also has abilities in that area for the purpose of keeping the server's code stable. And Dream picked Callahan for that role because he thought that he wouldn't have to worry about Callahan of all people interfering too much. Oopsie.

I hope that you're all safe and well, wherever you are. Y'all are lovely <3

[My tumblr](#)

Next up, Chapter Eighteen: In which Tommy's guest arrives on the server, and there's an unexpected reunion between old friends. Except it becomes apparent very quickly that something isn't right, in more ways than one.

Foolish

Chapter Notes

Surprise!! I'm back! Thank you all for your patience :D

This is not my favorite chapter I've ever written, but it is a chapter, and I'm very glad to finally be posting again.

Chapter content warnings for mentioned (past) death and mind-control, as well as potential slight unreality.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Foolish considers himself a go-with-the-flow kind of guy.

That's the main reason why he accepts the invitation to the server. Dream's server. He doesn't have a reason not to, and he didn't have any other plans, and he doesn't know much about the guy but he's heard *of* him. Everyone's heard *of* him, he thinks, though opinions differ depending on who you talk to. He can't say that he has one, hasn't cared enough until now.

He's got no idea why he was invited. So maybe he's a little curious, too.

So he joins. He's greeted by a dude wearing reindeer antlers. Or maybe growing them; he can't really tell. Dream himself is lurking in the trees, but Foolish pretends that he's doing a good job of hiding, just for the sake of politeness. Also for the sake of politeness, he decides not to mention the fact that the code around spawn feels weird, thin, like something's been trying to break through, because surely they know already. It's not exactly nice to barge onto someone else's server and immediately start pointing out everything wrong with it.

He bites his tongue about the architecture, too. Such as it is. Or at least, he limits himself to a couple of comments. If this is the reason he was invited, it would make sense. He's happy to provide some structures with a little more sophistication. For a price, of course. He knows the value of his labor.

He goes with the flow. Asks after the one who asked him here—some guy named *Tommyinnit*, if he's remembering correctly—and the reindeer guy, Callahan, points him in the direction of a place called L'Manberg. So he heads off that way, and he's greeted at the gates, obviously expected. He's given a tour. He meets a few people, though not Tommyinnit, not yet, and his guide doesn't seem to know exactly where he is. His guide also asks him if he wants to join, and he hems and haws because it's a little soon to be committing himself to anything, having only just arrived, and he doesn't really consider himself the country-joining type. He works best when he's got a nice space to himself. The kid doesn't seem to mind that.

Tubbo. Seems like a nice dude. A little young for government, but he's not one to judge.

Tubbo leads him around, and he meets the other members of this place. Catches a glimpse of the president, who gives off exactly the busy sort of vibes he might have expected. He gets a cookie from the bakery. Takes a long look at the flag, probably one of the most well-made things here. Other than the walls and a few nice-looking towers, there's really not much to write home about.

It's only a few hours in that he starts to realize that something really weird is going on. Because a few hours in is when he meets Tommyinnit, who pops up at his side like a jack-in-the-box or a particularly determined ghost. Who takes one look at him, and then demands that he follow. There's no real introduction, no lead-in, no basic exchange of courtesy. The guy walks up to him and tells him to come along as if there's no way that he could choose to do anything else.

"Um, okay?" he says. "Sure. Where are we going? Is this some kind of initiation?"

"Just—come on," Tommy says. He's younger than Foolish might have thought. And he's only become more perplexed upon meeting him, because looking him in the eyes, he is increasingly sure that he has never met this kid before in his life. So how he knew to ask for him specifically, and why, is beyond him. "Don't make a fucking fuss about it, yeah? You've gotta see something."

"I feel like I've done a lot of sightseeing today," he says, but he follows behind the guy as he leads him out of the walls of L'Manberg, marching with purpose. Foolish looks around with interest as they walk. There's still a lot of the server he hasn't seen yet, but Tommy doesn't seem interested in continuing the tour, or in stopping. Just in their destination. Wherever that may be.

Tommy's not striking him as a go-with-the-flow kind of guy.

"Does this have to do with why you invited me here?" he asks. "You are the one who invited me, right? That's what the deer guy said."

"Callahan's a fucking tattletale," Tommy says, not looking at him. "It doesn't matter."

"I think it might actually matter a little," he says, but he keeps following. It's not like he has anything better to do, even if Tommy's attitude toward him is definitely weird. Almost presumptuous, as if he's taken it for granted that Foolish will follow him, and Foolish doesn't know quite what to do with that other than play along. There's no harm in it, at least.

When Tommy finally stops, there's no real indication as to why. There's a fairly large, walled-off base over to one side, and a smaller house on the other. An obsidian field laid out across the grass, or maybe replacing it. It must have taken time to gather that much obsidian. There's a reason he doesn't build with it very much, and that's entirely because of the effort involved in collecting it.

"Alright, look," Tommy says. "You're gonna listen to me now, and you're gonna believe me, because I speak nothing but the truth literally ever."

"This is a promising start," he says.

Tommy frowns at him. And it's not the frown that gives him pause, because the frown looks like any other frown on any other teenager. But there's a look in his eyes. It's a familiar look, and it's unsettling, and he doesn't think that it belongs there. And he doesn't like it. He can't put a finger on it, but he doesn't like it.

"There's something under the obsidian," Tommy says.

"Okay," he says. "Judging by your tone, I'm guessing it's a bad something."

"Shut up and let me finish," Tommy says. "It's—yeah, it's a fucking bad something. It's the worst something. It's the worst fucking something you'll ever meet."

"Okay," he says again. "Can I ask—"

"No," Tommy says. "No, you fucking can't. It doesn't matter. It's just—it's bad. And it'll—you can't go near it, because it'll get all up in your head and then you won't be you anymore and you'll do whatever it asks and you'll probably die."

"I don't do that," he says automatically, and then gives a pointed glance to where they're standing, because if they're not supposed to go near it then this seems like a horrible place to be. Also, what is this kid even talking about.

Tommy rolls his eyes. "That's what the obsidian's for, shithead," he says. "Keeps it nice and locked up, see? It can't talk to you if obsidian's blocking it. And it's probably not even awake yet. But it's down there, and it's terrible, and it needs to go."

Sure. Sure, why not. This might as well be a thing. He doesn't think he's been this confused in a very, very long time, but sure. This feels like a fever dream, or what he thinks a fever dream would feel like, since he doesn't really get sick.

"And you're telling me this because—?" he says, hoping beyond hope for a more clear explanation.

"I'm the only one who knows it's there," Tommy says. "Just me."

"Why—"

"Because if anyone else knew it was there, they'd want to go look at it," Tommy says. "And they'd go all mimimimi it's just an egg, what's it gonna do, and they'd be stupid and wrong and then they'd be mind-controlled and then it's over. It's game fucking over. This whole server goes under."

"I'm sorry, did you say *egg*—"

"So I can't fucking say anything, see? Because everyone else'll be all stupid about it, and then they'll get themselves fucking killed or some shit."

Foolish does not think that he sees. He thinks that he is not the one at fault for this. He thinks that Tommy is not doing a very good job at explaining, as much as the kid seems to believe that he is.

“Okay then,” he says. “Then why tell me about it, exactly? I’m confused.”

Tommy levels a stare at him. There’s that same look in his eyes. Something old, something empty. Something dead. And with a start and a curl of nausea, unexpected in its onset, Foolish realizes exactly what that look is.

Recognition. Someone who knows exactly who and what they’re talking to. It’s not an expression that he’s seen in a very long time. It’s not an expression he ever thought he’d see again. He’s retired. He’s peaceful. He builds things now. His skin glimmers golden and sometimes his back twitches with the memory of wings and he gives life and creates beauty, and in Tommy’s eyes is the expectation of something else. Someone else.

And with that realization comes another: death clings to Tommy like a second skin. It’s fuzzy, indistinct, difficult to make out. Something strange about it. Transient and slippery, like the universe itself can’t make up its mind as to whether it really exists or not. But Foolish is not so far from his roots that he can’t see it.

“Because you can fight it,” Tommy says. “You’re one of the only ones who can.”

He states it like a fact. For a moment, Foolish can say nothing at all.

Then, he laughs, scrambling to cover up his unease, his growing panic.

“I think you’ve got me mistaken for someone else,” he says. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m very powerful. You might even call me a god. But I’m not the god of that kind of thing. I don’t really go in for that.”

Never mind that even the suggestion is enough to set something in his blood stirring. Never mind that his fingers still remember the feel of a sword, an axe, a bow, the motion of a trident flung at a target rather than clouded skies. Never mind the lightning, the thunder, the promise of storms. Never mind the thrill. Never mind the power. Never mind all the things he pushes down, down, down. Never mind all the things he swore he’d stop being. That he has stopped being.

Never mind the fact that Tommy is looking at him like he sees all of it, no matter how impossible that should be.

“Doesn’t matter what you’re the god of, does it?” Tommy says. “Reckon you could be the god of anything, things get desperate enough.”

“I don’t do desperate,” he says, a little desperately.

“Everybody does desperate,” Tommy says. “Enough people die, you get pretty desperate.”

“Is someone dead?” he asks.

“They’re gonna be!” Tommy says. He steps forward, hands slicing through the air, a fervent gesture that Foolish isn’t quite sure how to read. “They’re gonna—this is the last fucking thing. If I can deal with this fucking shitshow, that’s it. We’ll be—everything’ll be fine. Simply poggers. But it’s—it’s fucking dangerous, and nobody took it too seriously until it

was too fucking late, so if you're gonna stand there and be stupid about it then you might as well fuck off because you're not doing anything helpful—"

"Literally, *what* are you talking about?"

Tommy goes silent, lips drawing together, the blood draining from his face.

"I know you can fight it," he says eventually. "You with your, your lightning and shit. It can't kill you as easy, not unless you let it. And I'm not—'m not saying you have to do anything right now. Not today. But it's gonna wake up, and by the time it wakes up it might be too late because that's when it'll start taking people, and maybe we won't get those people back, and I'm not fucking doing that. I'm not fucking—I'm not fucking *losing* anybody. So you've gotta help me."

Nothing about this guy makes any sense at all. Foolish has never been so certain that there's vital information that he doesn't have. It's a connect-the-dots picture with half the dots missing, and most of the rest of them unnumbered.

"Why *me*?" he says. "There's—okay, there's not a whole lot of guys like me out there. But I'm not the only god that exists. Why would you pick me for this? How did you even hear about me?"

That's the real question. If Tommy has an idea of his history, a history he doesn't even admit to himself most of the time, then maybe it's plausible that Tommy would latch onto him as someone who could help him out with this—situation. But that would beg the question of how Tommy learned any of that at all, and how he connected the god that he was to the god that he is and always will be. It shouldn't be easy. Not easy enough that any random teenager could figure it out, anyway, and especially not if he wasn't already looking into specifics.

It doesn't make sense.

"Not your fucking business, is it?" Tommy says.

"I think it is my business!" he says. "You call me to this server without telling me why, and then it turns out that you want me to go back on, like, decades of nonviolence for the sake of a threat that you can't show me and that I have zero idea about or stake in, and I don't even know you. I literally don't even know you. Why should I take your word for any of this?"

The color is coming back into Tommy's face, turning it red.

"Don't be a pussy," he snaps. "I just told you why I can't show it to you."

"And again, why should I believe you?"

"Because it's *true*."

Really, the issue isn't even that he doesn't believe the kid. At the very least, he thinks he believes that the kid believes it. He's all earnestness and drive and maybe some of that desperation he was talking about, and the way he's looking at Foolish now makes him think

that Tommy is genuinely confused as to why he's not going along with this anymore. He can't decide whether it's a point in his favor or not.

So the issue isn't that he doesn't believe Tommy. The issue is the rest of it. The issue is that he doesn't understand why Tommy asked after him specifically and he doesn't understand why it's something he should care about when he's been on this server for all of a few hours and he doesn't want to slide back into old habits. Not that he would. Not that it's tempting. Not that there's some part of him just begging to be cut loose, to flex his powers and show everyone around him who's boss. Because there's not. Not at all.

But it's better not to risk it.

He opens his mouth to say something to that effect, even if Tommy has been brushing past all of his other arguments up to this point, but Tommy cuts him off.

"Just don't leave, alright?" he says. "Just—stay here, stay on this server. Go and build your stupid desert temple or whatever, be as far away as you want, but stay on this server. I'll—I'll figure out a way to prove it to you. You'll see, you'll see it's bad. And then you'll help."

"You seem very sure of that," he replies.

"You will," Tommy says. "Doesn't matter what kind of god you are. There's always something—something worth *protecting*. Worth everything. And this thing puts everything in danger."

His stomach flips again. He blinks. Looks from Tommy to the obsidian and back again.

"I'll think about it," he concedes.

"Fine," Tommy says. "Fucking fine. Just think about it *here*."

Overhead, there's a storm gathering, dark clouds and the occasional flash of lightning, high above. He glances up at it, wondering if it's naturally occurring or if he pulled it in, summoned it through the sheer force of his discomfort, and when he looks back down, Tommy is gone. Not completely; he catches a glimpse of his retreating back, heading back in the direction of L'Manberg. But it does seem like a retreat, like fleeing.

And he can't help but wonder what exactly the kid thought the outcome of this conversation would be. Did he really expect Foolish to react differently? Personally, he thinks his response was perfectly reasonable. He doesn't know anybody here. He doesn't have a stake in their problems. All he wants to do is live peacefully, and Tommy is pretty clearly trying to pull him away from that. The whole thing was just weird, and he has a pretty high tolerance for weirdness, but this is pushing it.

He looks back at the field. There's a figure on the other side, staring at him with a shovel in hand. It's hard to make out more than a silhouette, the sky darkening as it is, but he thinks he sees a red flash where their eyes should be.

"Nope," he says out loud, and turns on his heel.

He likes being out in storms, feels no urge to seek shelter. So, walking as the rain begins to fall gives him time and space to think it over. He's curious, he'll admit, even still. But curious enough to stay and risk—whatever it is he'd be risking? For the sake of a weird, rude kid that he doesn't know and the weird kid's friends who he also doesn't know?

Maybe not.

But then again, Tommy wants his help specifically. That's almost enough to make him feel guilty if he were to decide to leave. Even if that's ridiculous. He'd have nothing to feel guilty about. He'd be well within his rights to put this server behind him and not look back.

But maybe if he stays, he can get them to give him gear, maybe other stuff. He could ask for payment in gold. That seems reasonable. And he can never have enough gold.

Would the pros outweigh the cons, here?

Lightning flashes, and as if summoned by his thought, his gaze catches on one of the towers he'd noted earlier. He's wandered fairly close, and as the area briefly brightens, something gleams between the stones. Gold accenting. Whoever's building these structures has good taste, better taste than he's noted in any of the other builds so far. He lets his feet carry him closer, debating the merits of just leaving the server right now and trying to pretend that this never happened.

And then he draws up short.

There's a person at the base of the tower, digging through a chest with one hand and with the other, holding a slab of wood over their head like the world's worst umbrella. They're muttering to themselves, irritation audible even over the patter of rain and rolling of thunder. They're wearing the same uniform that most of the other people in L'Manberg were wearing, along with a pair of unfamiliar sunglasses perched on their nose.

But it's Eret.

It's *Eret*.

He can feel the grin spreading on his face. Not that he would try to hold it back. A few things slot into place, suddenly; if Tommy originally heard about him from Eret, then that might explain why he sought him out. Honestly, Tommy probably should have led with that. It might have made him feel better about the whole thing.

"Hey there!" he calls, striding closer. Eret jerks and looks up, the white of their eyes hidden behind the dark lenses. The chest they were rooting through slips closed, their hand falling from the lid.

"Hello?" they say. They sound uncertain, startled; maybe they didn't know he was here, or that he was coming.

"Sorry, I don't know if you're busy," he says. "Don't mind me. Are the towers yours?"

“They’re a work in progress, but yes,” Eret says, after a beat. “I’m not that busy, it’s alright. I was thinking about heading home before this started up.” They gesture at the sky, but they’re otherwise motionless. Even unable to see their eyes, Foolish feels the weight of their undivided focus. It’s a creeping static, a prickle across his spine, the regard of something distinctly other. But that’s just Eret. He’s used to it.

“Yeah, that might have been me,” he says. “Maybe. Sorry about that.”

“It’s not a problem,” Eret says. They sound strangely distant, a little hesitant. How long has it been since the last time they saw each other? Foolish isn’t great at tracking things like that, but it’s never really been necessary between the two of them. They fall apart and then fall back together again, returning to each other’s company as if no time had passed at all. They can go long periods without so much as hearing from the other, but that’s never meant that much in the grand scheme of things.

“So, how’ve you been?” he says, stepping closer. He doesn’t miss the way Eret tenses, and unease starts to open a pit in his gut. Everything about this server seems weird. Off. Is that going to extend to Eret, too? “I have to say, I wasn’t expecting to find you here. I didn’t think this kind of server was your scene.”

Eret’s head tilts.

And then, they step closer, too. Foolish doesn’t have time to feel relieved before they step forward again, and again, until they’re literally right there. Too close for comfort if it was anyone else.

For a moment, they’re completely silent.

“Um,” he says. “Eret? You good?”

Eret reaches out and puts a hand on his cheek. It’s feather-light contact, barely a hold at all, and he could pull away easily if he wanted to. He doesn’t, even though every instinct he has is starting to scream that something about this is not right.

“I’m fine,” Eret says, even though they don’t sound fine, sound hazy and troubled and a couple of other things that Foolish can’t quite put a name to. And now that they’re standing right there, Foolish can pick out the slight distortion in the air around them, the minute fracturing of the code that follows each and every breath they take, the cracking around their fingertips that heals in the space of the next blink.

It’s nothing out of the ordinary for them, not really. But there’s something about it that raises the hairs on the back of his neck.

“You seem a little stressed,” he says, and tries to crack a smile. Eret’s hand doesn’t move from his face. “I hope it’s not because of me. Maybe I should’ve written ahead. In my defense, I wasn’t really expecting I’d come here either.”

“I—” Eret says, and then stops.

Foolish waits. The smile is a little hard to maintain. Worry accumulates, a foreign tightness in his chest. It's been a long time since he's had to worry about Eret.

And then, Eret says the most baffling thing Foolish has ever heard from them, which is saying something, since Eret is, on occasion, very baffling. Comes with the territory.

"I know you?" Eret says, finally. It's unmistakably a question, tilting upward and terribly, horribly uncertain.

"Uh," he says, and attempts a laugh that very much does not sound like a laugh. Because what. "Yes? Are we stating the obvious? I can do that, too. Um, I'm a really good swimmer."

There's a knot in his throat. A pit in his stomach. Something that transcends worry, that feels almost like fear, except it can't be fear, because he doesn't fear. There's nothing that he'd ever need to be afraid of. Except, maybe, for the expression on Eret's face right now, the faltering touch against his face, the tremor in their voice, the way they suddenly seem so *lost*. He's never seen his old friend look so lost.

"I—" Eret starts again. "I know you. I know—but I thought that it was—that doesn't make any—you know me?"

"Of course I know you," he says, and makes a point of looking them up and down. "Yeah, same old you. New uniform. Um, the glasses are new. But it's you, for sure. You're my pal Eret."

"But that's—" Eret shakes their head. They're getting rained on, the both of them, and their curls are damp, well on their way to being plastered to their skull. "It's too—I don't think you're supposed to be here yet, so you shouldn't—but that's not—I remember—"

"You remember!" he says, latching onto that. Maybe he's misunderstanding. Maybe there's no reason to be afraid. It's weird, but—usual weirdness. They'll work it out. They always do. "See, uh, maybe you're just a little bit confused. Too much sun?" The rain splatters down a little harder, as if in direct contradiction to his words. "Or maybe you're coming down with something. Too much work. Uh, and now it's raining. It's kinda cold out here, isn't it? Maybe we should go inside."

Eret leans forward, leans in, and the force of their attention feels like a static storm. The code is bending, and they don't even seem to realize that they're doing it, oblivious to their own capabilities.

Their hand moves from his face to rest gently against his neck. Their finger traces a line across his skin, passing right across his jugular, and then the hand falls.

"I saw you die," Eret says. Barely a whisper.

It takes him a moment to find his voice. Lightning flashes overhead, followed by a crash of thunder.

"I don't die," he says. "Eret—"

“I watched,” they say, and they take on an odd cadence, distant and with the hint of an echo. Something resonant, something so strongly *other* that even he begins to feel uneasy. “I watched, and I couldn’t do a thing. You traded your life for mine. I watched it soak up your blood.”

He shudders. Some part of him wants to move back. To flee the server. He won’t, because he’s not about to flee from *Eret*. That would be ridiculous.

“Eret, buddy, I think you’re, uh, maybe misremembering something here—”

“You died for me,” Eret says. “You died for *me*. And then they killed me too.”

“*Eret—*”

“None of us escaped that room,” Eret says, flat, face blank. At their fingertips, the code distorts. Foolish catches a whisper, the barest hint of the void, something creeping and something watching and something sad and something that should not be. And this is Eret’s area of expertise, not his; his powers lie in a completely different direction, especially these days. But he can tell when something is very wrong. He can tell when something has broken, has been twisted against its own shape and form. He can pick up on dangerous magics, and magic clings to Eret like a death shroud. Hard to see, just like the aura around Tommy. Like it’s something that *should not exist*.

“Eret,” he whispers. “What did you do?”

Eret’s face crumples. It’s instinct to hug them, though the instant after he does, he wonders if that was a good move, because Eret’s memories—are in shambles, apparently, and that’s *highly concerning*, and maybe they really don’t have much of an idea of who he is and who they are together. But he doesn’t have to worry for long, because Eret shoves their face against his shoulder, their hands latching onto his back and gripping uncomfortably tight.

“I don’t know,” they say, voice like shards of glass. “I don’t *know*, I don’t understand what’s happening to me, I have memories that shouldn’t be mine and I think I broke the world, and—I should *know* you, I should know you, Foolish. I don’t know what’s happening. I don’t know—I barely know what’s *real*.”

“Oh, jeez,” he says. “Okay. Okay, we’ll figure it out. I’ll help you. That’s what friends are for. Weird brain things or not. We’ll jog those memories of yours.”

“I think I betrayed my friends,” Eret says. “I think—I think I did it, but I haven’t, but it makes *sense*. I think I would. For power.”

You do like a bit of power; he almost agrees, but manages to hold his tongue, because even he can see that that would not be a helpful thing to say right now.

“Okay,” he says instead. “Um. You did it, but you haven’t? Like—as of now, you haven’t, so that’s—that’s the important thing.” Never mind that the phrase *you did it, but you haven’t* definitely makes no sense. That’s not the priority at the moment.

“I keep seeing things that haven’t happened,” Eret says, only just audible. “But I know they did. I keep—affecting the code in ways I don’t mean to. I don’t understand it and I can’t stop it.”

“Well, I’m here to help now,” he says. “We’ll figure it out. Just like old times.”

Eret pulls back, looks him in the eyes, though they shift their hands to take a death grip on his arms. If he blinked they could be somewhere else, somewhen else, in the aftermath of a battle well-fought—or a massacre, depending on which side was narrating—clasping arms and reveling in their victory.

“Old times,” they echo. “I don’t—I don’t remember. I’m sorry.”

“We’ll figure it out,” he repeats, feeling like a broken record.

“You’re sure,” they say. “You’re sure that you know me? You’re not thinking of someone else?”

With one hand, they reach up and take off their glasses. It’s funny, how a sight that would alarm a whole lot of people is nothing but relaxing to Foolish. Because there they are, those blank white eyes, glowing with all the promise of a break in the universe, something that should not be but is. A glitch, a distortion, a corruption. That’s what Eret comes from, and that’s part of what Eret is, and they both know it; Eret comments on it often, talks about what is *meant to be* with a wry smile and a tilt of their head.

But Foolish doesn’t care about that. The universe can shove it.

Eret is tense, holding his gaze steadily. There is something in their face that screams of an expectation of condemnation. They haven’t looked at Foolish like that since just after they first met. He’s not sure he wants to know who put that expression back there again, because he really would like to continue upholding his vow of nonviolence.

“Same old Eret,” he says. “Memories or not.” His smile is a little more genuine this time.

Eret blinks. Once, slowly.

“I trust you,” they say. “I feel like—I trust you, even if I don’t really know why.”

“Hey, that’s a start!” he says. “See, we’ll have you remembering things in no time. And for the rest of it—I won’t lie, I’ve got no clue, but there’s nothing we can’t do when we put our heads together. You trust me, I trust you. We’re good. We’ve got this.”

Eret says nothing, just breathes, in and out. Their shoulders set, some of the anxiety falling from their face, becoming more like the Eret that Foolish is familiar with. Self-assured, powerful, always on top of things. Their gaze flicks to the side, and then back at him.

“There’s something coming,” they say. “Something terrible.”

That’s—huh.

He'd put the whole Tommy thing out of his mind in favor of focusing on this. Maybe he should reconsider that. Maybe one weird thing is connected to another.

"Under the obsidian field?" he says. "That's what Tommy said."

They start. "Tommy?" they demand. "Tommy—but wait—"

Their eyebrows knit together. The code distortions become more prominent, especially around their head, like an approximation of a halo. He clasps their arms tighter.

"Weird kid," he says. "Look, I don't really know what's going on. But we'll work on it. How about we get out of the rain right now? You can show me your tower. This is for sure one of the best builds I've seen on this server. Does no one else have any sense of good design around here? I mean, there's a hot dog van that's on fire. Why is that even a thing?"

Eret smiles, the furrow in their brow easing, which was the point. "The camarvan," they say. "It's got sentimental value. But I'll admit, I've been doing a lot of the building around here. It might be nice to have a bit of help."

"Hm," he says. "Give me some gold, then we'll talk."

Eret laughs, rich and familiar, and leads him into the base of the tower. Their sunglasses are still gripped in one hand, and they make no move to put them back on. And—he can admit that this whole thing is weird and scary and bad, because never in a million years would he have expected to find an Eret who didn't remember him, whose memories in general were all strange and mixed up, who seemed to barely know who they were at all. But Eret is still Eret, and that's really what matters.

So, maybe he'll end up giving Tommy the help he wants after all.

Chapter End Notes

First time writing c!Foolish pov, so feel free to let me know how I did lmao. C!Foolish is kind of a bitch and I love him for it. Tommy, on the other hand, is trying so hard to get this dealt with that he's starting to completely throw the idea of 'acting normal' out the window.

... Sure hope there's nothing going on that he's not aware of or didn't know to plan for haha.

Thank you all for still being here, even after unplanned three month hiatuses. It means the world <3

[My tumblr](#)

Next up, Chapter Nineteen: In which Quackity and Wilbur have a conversation. Nothing more than that.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!